Psychological analysis of John Smyth and his abuse

Dr Elly Hanson, August 2022; minor additions November 2023

Introduction

This analysis of John Smyth and his abusive behaviour is informed by a wide variety of material (for example, transcripts of victim interviews and meetings; the key papers and reports produced over the years; letters from and to Smyth; witness statements; Andrew Graystone's book 'Bleeding for Jesus'; meeting minutes), alongside regular meetings with Keith Makin and Sarah Lawrence over a 20 month period, and meetings with members of John Smyth's family. In formulating my views I am informed by a range of research literatures such as those on narcissism and Narcissistic Personality Disorder; sadism; the dynamics and impact of abuse (including on dissociation, shame, and betrayal trauma); offender behaviour and psychology; cultural and systemic contributors to abuse; and cult dynamics and psychology.

My necessary starting point is naming the (interacting, overlapping) forms of abuse that John Smyth perpetrated. Those central that I identify are physical violence, sexual abuse, coercive control, psychological abuse, and emotional neglect (the latter being of his children). He used parts of the Bible and religious authority to assist his abuse and some see this is a distinct form of abuse: spiritual abuse; alternatively it can be seen as a layer of coercive control and psychological abuse.

Smyth abused more than 25 boys and young men in England, a large but unknown number of boys in Zimbabwe, and he maltreated[1] his own children. The latter included regular severe beatings of his son PJ from a young age, psychological abuse (for example, manipulative and coercive efforts to control their thinking), and significant emotional neglect and invalidation, in particular of his daughters.

Core analysis

The critical question that first prompted the reviewers to seek an expert psychological opinion was: what were John Smyth's motives for his abuse? On the basis of my review of all of the above, I am of the view that his abuse was an attempt to achieve the following[2]:

- Sexual gratification
- Pleasure from other people's pain (including their humiliation) – i.e. a sadistic motive
- Status; a desire to be at the top of one's chosen hierarchy and to be admired and revered
- Dominance and control of others

It is also possible that he was acting out of resentment and revenge motives (discussed briefly towards the end of the section on Smyth's narcissism below), but there is insufficient evidence to be confident of this.

John Smyth had various psychological qualities that contributed to these motives, as well as to his decision to act on them and to the escalation of his behaviour. It appears that he had Narcissistic Personality Disorder (grandiose type) and, related to this, little interest in relational connection; little ability or willingness to self-reflect; a focus on his self-interest

[1] Child maltreatment is an umbrella term covering any of the following: physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological or emotional abuse (including witnessing domestic abuse), and the various forms of neglect including emotional.

[2] These motives can overlap and interact.

above those of others; and little or no empathy. He displayed exhibitionist and voyeuristic tendencies; callousness; and an ability to charm (a magnetism). It also appears that he had a sexual interest in boys and young man (not incompatible with a sexual interest in his wife).

Interacting with these motives and qualities, he held a number of core beliefs that may have either helped fuel or support his abusive behaviour. These included the beliefs that he was more important than others (i.e. a sense of entitlement); that being gay (or having gay sexual experiences) is a serious moral wrong; and that some people are 'elected' and endowed with special qualities to lead and be an authority over others (in particular himself). It seems that he had an implicit working model of the world in which relationships conformed to a dominant / submissive pattern (in other words, he did not have a conception of or belief in relationships between equals), and that he often saw his family members as avatars, not full people in their own right but in some way extensions of himself.

In the sections below, I unpack some of these factors and the part I perceive they played in his abuse. A deep understanding of his offending also requires identifying the organisational and cultural factors (beliefs, narratives and practices) that may have interacted with him to facilitate it. In Box I, I outline those identified as potentially relevant in the course of this review. In addition our understanding is assisted by a delineation of his 'modus operandi': the strategies (including justifying narratives) that he used to enact and get away with it, and I summarise those which I have identified in Box II. These are also important in understanding the entrapping dynamics (which I discuss in the final section) and impact of his abuse.

Sexual gratification

No single factor is sufficient to determine a sexual motivation to John Smyth's abuse, however various things when taken together indicate that this was highly likely to be at play in his beatings of young men and boys – these factors are as follows:

- His evident special interest in boys thought of as good-looking, conforming to a particular type (interestingly when questioned about this, he did not deny it but reacted oddly, curling up into a foetal position)
- His obsession with the topic of masturbation by adolescent boys and young men, and the entwining of this obsession with the beatings and abuse he perpetrated. In the UK, he used boys' masturbation (or the possibility of it) to justify their ever-increasing beatings, treating it as if it was the greatest sin. However this cannot be understood simply as a (mis)interpretation of the Bible, because a) masturbation is not directly addressed in the Bible (compared to many other behaviours named as wrongdoing, for example, those forbidden by the ten commandments); and b) at other points in his life he justifies discussion of masturbation with boys being merited because it is a natural thing to do, part of being a man. Quite simply, neither justification holds up as genuine in light of him also deploying the other, its contradiction.
- The nudity he enforced on the British boys and young men whilst they were being beaten, alongside his own nudity; and the nudity he also enforced on the Zimbabwean boys' camps, such as the mandated naked swims ('skinny dipping') and his showering with boys – importantly even after disapproval and censure by others. As with his focus on masturbation, his justifications for this nudity were shifting, nonsensical and contradictory, it was alternately for 'humility', for 'fun' (despite being forced), or to be 'all boys together'.
- His invitation of a boy to visit his bedroom (at a Iwerne camp) at a time when he was having sex with his wife, and inviting the boy in whilst him and his wife were in bed together

Whilst it appears that Smyth was not observed having an erection by his victims, this does not mean he was not sexually motivated as a) his victims faced away from him during the beatings and so any erection would not have been visible, and b) sexual intent can be present without an erection; indeed for some individuals there may be an added thrill in its suppression.

Smyth was fervent in his expressed disapproval of homosexuality. This does not caution against there being a sexual motive to his abuse of males, indeed research suggests that some homophobic men have homosexual interests which may in fact be contributing to their homophobia (e.g. Cheval et al., 2016). Interestingly, research indicates that individuals are more likely to hide homosexual feelings when they have fathers who do not support their autonomy (for example by being authoritarian), and when they have a self-esteem that is dependent on achievements and external validation (Weinstein et al., 2012) – Smyth appears to have had such a father as well as this form of self-esteem (both discussed more below). His expression of homophobia may have also helped him to hide his abuse in plain sight.

Sadism

Smyth's abuse was sadistic in nature, by this I mean he gained a primary gratification through hurting others, in contrast to this hurt being a means to another end (such as obedience). Sadistic motives often entwine with those that are sexual, i.e. a person gains sexual pleasure from another's pain, distress or humiliation (Foulkes, 2019)[3]. Clear evidence of his sadistic motive includes:

- The escalation of his beatings in the UK, and how his abuse became completely untethered from any stated justification (e.g. a beating 'due' to a particular sin) when he no longer needed this cover (because he had achieved control and entrapment of a victim)
- The severity of his beatings – these often involved hundreds of lashings at a time and left victims unable to sit down for weeks
- As with his masturbation focus and enforced nudity, Smyth's justifications for beating boys shifted and contradicted one another, thereby revealing themselves as disingenuous: they were narrated as 'nailing one's sins to the cross'[4]; a pathway to spiritual growth; a form of discipline; a game (in Zimbabwe); and an effect of sleeping pills (when challenged on his beatings in the UK)

There were some particularly humiliating elements of the beatings, such as victims at times losing control of their bladder or bowels and the use of adult nappies, which may have played into his pleasure.

Research and theory suggest that sadistic behaviour often develops over time, increasing first as guilt lessens (and pleasure increases), but then further escalating because the pleasure becomes harder to achieve, indeed elusive (as desensitization and habituation take hold) (Baumeister & Campbell, 1999). In this regard it can take on qualities of an addiction, in which there is a strong urge for something that when gained does not lead to commensurate feelings

[3] Note that, given that it is not of direct relevance, I am excluding from the discussion here sadism enacted within clear and consenting BDSM frameworks (which I am neither pathologizing nor endorsing).

[4] It appears that Smyth habitually used emotive phrases such as this to drive compliance to his wishes. This phrase is a metaphor, yet the metaphorical, constructed nature of a phrase can be lost with its repeated usage as a statement of fact. This together with the omission of a clear explanation of its intended meaning, can protect this and similar phrases from scrutiny and debate, increasing their power on those they are aimed at. They become accepted as self-evident and beyond contestation.

of pleasure or fulfilment.[5] The central driving force of perpetrator pleasure in another's pain is particularly evident when their behaviour to cause this pain compromises other goals they hold (Bulut, 2017). One example of this cited in the literature is the excessive torture at times inflicted by individuals experienced in using it as a tool of interrogation (in comparison to novices). This 'overkill', by often incapacitating the victim, reduces the hardened torturers' chances of gaining the sought information (Baumeister & Campbell, 1999). Smyth persisted in escalating his beatings despite the increasing risk to his reputation and career (amongst other things) that this incurred.

It should be noted that my view that John Smyth was sexually and sadistically motivated accords with that of psychologist Margaret Henning (as recorded in her report dated 25th September 1993).

Sadism forms one of what researchers have termed the 'Dark Tetrad' – four personality traits that are conducive to antisocial behaviour and that can often relate to one another and co-occur, these comprise sadism, psychopathy, narcissism and Machiavellianism (see for example, Bulut, 2017; Wolf, 2020). John Smyth was also highly narcissistic, these traits influencing his abuse, as delineated below.

Control and domination

Relating to John Smyth's sadistic motives was his quest for dominance and control. Indeed sadistic and domination motives are often hard to disentangle (Foulkes, 2019), as one offender states: *"the wish to inflict pain is not the essence of sadism. One essential impulse is to have complete mastery over another person, to make him a helpless object… to become her god"* (J. M. DeBardeleben cited in Longpre et al., 2019). A victim's distress may be enjoyed by the offender in its own right, or because it is an indicator of their power. Similarly, offenders may seek power over their victim in its own right, or because this enables the abuse to continue (there is no escape and the victim cannot speak out). For our purposes, we need not disentangle these motives in Smyth, but rather more simply note that both gratification in his victims' pain and his quest for power over them are evident (whether or not these reduce to the same thing or one is secondary to the other).

The beatings both demonstrated and served to increase Smyth's power and control over his victims. With each beating, victims' sense of helplessness and defeat is likely to have increased, the abuse creating downward spirals of perpetrator power and victim powerlessness (discussed further below). As delineated in Box 11, beyond the beatings themselves (whilst interacting with them), Smyth employed a wide range of power and control tactics, such as isolating victims from friends and family, positioning himself (through words and actions) as an authoritative father figure, and projecting omniscience.

Narcissism

At its core, narcissism is *entitled self-importance*. As narcissism theorists Zlatan Krizan and Anne Herlache summarise: *"narcissistic individuals are those who view their own needs and goals as more significant than others' and exhibit an inflated sense of importance and deservingness"* (Krizan & Herlache, 2017). Narcissism traits vary across the population and at the extreme end they are termed Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD). Individuals with NPD exhibit a pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy and behaviour), need for admiration, and lack of empathy across a range of contexts (Diagnostic Statistical Manual 5th Edition, DSM-5). My extensive review of material that pertains to John Smyth across his adulthood, and related

[5] Note that addictive qualities can be recognised without minimising the behaviour's cruelty or wrongfulness

discussions with those who knew him, lead me to the view that he meets criteria for NPD. To have Narcissistic Personality Disorder, the DSM-V specifies that individuals must display at least five of a specified list of behaviours, and it seems evident that Smyth did so – for example, he had a grandiose sense of self-importance; believed he was special and unique; had a sense of entitlement (i.e. unreasonable expectation of especially favourable treatment or automatic compliance with his expectations); was interpersonally exploitative (i.e. took advantage of others to achieve his own ends); and lacked empathy (was unwilling to recognise or identify with the feelings and needs of others). He displayed these qualities both within his Christian community and within his family.

Understanding narcissistic individuals and their interaction with others assists in understanding John Smyth's abuse, in particular how he achieved it and avoided censure. Narcissism broadly divides into two forms – grandiose and vulnerable – although they can co-occur and are more likely to in highly narcissistic individuals (Jauk et al., 2017). John Smyth clearly falls into the grandiose category. Both types of narcissist share a focus on their social status and image, and a comparative disregard for 'affiliative' goals, i.e. achieving relational closeness with others (Zeigler-Hill et al., 2018). They see other people through the lens of hierarchy and competition, not generally as equals. People are viewed according to their service or threat to the narcissists' status. Consistent with theory, research indicates that narcissism is cultivated in children by parental overvaluation (parents conveying to their children that they are and should be special and superior) and conditional regard (for example, being cold when children lose status, lavishing praise when they gain it) (e.g. Brummelman et al., 2015; Brummelman, 2018).

Grandiose narcissists are typically extroverted, exhibitionist, high in self-belief and self-liking, and they implicitly follow the maxim '*I am superior and I will let you know about it*', whereas in contrast vulnerable narcissists are typically introverted, holding the view that '*secretly I know that I am superior*', and are defensive and reactive (Krizan & Herlache, 2017; Jauk et al., 2017). There has been much debate in the literature about whether the superiority and entitlement narcissists hold is really a defence against implicit or deeply held feelings of low self-worth. The evidence suggests this is true of vulnerable narcissists but seemingly not of those who are grandiose (Krizan & Herlache, 2017).

Grandiose narcissists are drawn to hierarchical social contexts where status is salient, as in such environments there is the opportunity to perform to others – to see in others' eyes their high status reflected back to them. They will engage in various efforts at self-promotion, and will turn to derogating others when they are judged to be a hindrance to the narcissist's status pursuit (Grapsas et al., 2020). Narcissists are often successful at conveying to others that they are special or superior, especially in contexts where relationships are comparatively superficial, and they are more likely to seek out and gain leadership within a group.

John Smyth's narcissistic strategies were highly successful within the conservative evangelical community in the years before, during and following his campaign of abuse in the UK, and this was pivotal to him achieving his abuse and evading justice. This community was hierarchical and status-oriented – to both status within the group and within society more widely. In relation to the former, it appears there were various 'circles within circles', for example, Iwerne was it's own circle of status, and then within that, certain people were seen as particularly special; particular individuals were seen as endowed with unique leadership qualities, and some of these (John Smyth included) perceived as having the additional gift of spotting leaders in others (special vision). In relation to wider societal status, the movement pursued an explicit strategy of trying to convert to it boys that were deemed of high rank (educated at elite private schools, athletic, attractive and so forth), because such individuals

were seen as having more potential to influence society (that such an unjust and inequitable system exists was embraced rather than challenged). In this process, boys were arguably somewhat objectified, seen in part as instruments to achieve higher ends (just as how narcissists approach others) – for example young men were taught to strategically write letters to younger boys that they had been assigned in order to retain their faith and loyalty (see Graystone, 2021, for more details).

Alongside aligning with British society's prejudicial class system, the conservative evangelical community also appeared to adopt a 'them and us' mentality, it's belief system focussed on those who are saved and accepted by God (themselves) versus those who have rejected God and so live under his wrath (nearly everyone else). This majority were seen as a threat, motivated to undermine the community. Groups such as this may be particularly vulnerable to the charms and combative leadership of a grandiose narcissist (Grapsas et al., 2020), such an individual validating their worldview whilst seeming to offer both status and protection.

All in all, this community held beliefs that complemented Smyth's narcissism and afforded the perfect setting for him to gain the high social status that he believed he was due. A synergistic dynamic appears to have developed, in which the movement revered him, serving his narcissistic desires, and in parallel, it enjoyed the 'reflected glory' from his societal status as a successful QC. As an individual's power and status within a group increases, so too can a tendency towards 'wilful blindness': to overlook 'red flags' and minimise the person's wrongdoings. This occurs for several reasons: people are (even half-consciously) loathe to lose the advantages that the individual's status affords the group; they are concerned about the reputational damage this wrongdoing, if truly faced, could lead to; and furthermore, they have been taken in by the individuals' projected version of themselves. And so, as a result of all of these factors, their 'schema' (assumptions or working model) of them simply does not allow for this conflicting information.

This is made all the worse when the narcissist has successfully aligned themselves (in the eyes of themselves and others) with God. When he is seen as a leader chosen by God, 'gifted in ministry' and the like, his nefarious motivations and behaviour are even harder for others to countenance – misgivings and concerns feel like a disloyalty to God, and indeed Smyth explicitly narrated them as such. Furthermore, fears about loss of reputation are compounded by the concern that people will lose their faith and fewer will be drawn to it. It should also be noted that Smyth worked especially hard to construct himself as God's chosen emissary in the minds of his victims (for example, talking as if God was speaking and working through him, using phrases such as '*the Lord is looking for more'*).

A final important point regarding John Smyth's narcissism is that it likely played into his motives for the abuse. Whilst being a grandiose narcissist by no means equates to being abusive, its combination of character traits (the drive to be better than others, low empathy, and little interest in affiliative relationships) are certainly conducive to it. John Smyth's ability to control numerous, societally privileged boys and young men is likely to have boosted his ego, contributing to his sense of elevated status. In other words he may have found 'proof' of his superiority in his ability to control and hurt them. This may have interplayed with the chip on his shoulder he is reported to have held about not attending an elite public school, in contrast to his victims – by beating boys he saw as being granted a status in society that he had not been afforded but seemingly felt he deserved, he perhaps not only boosted his ego (feeling he had elevated himself above them) but also gave expression to feelings of resentment and revenge.

For some, there are few degrees between the motive to be 'above' others (have high status), the motives to control and hurt them and bring them down, and the sexual thrill that this all

can bring. In addition, Smyth's belief in his own superiority allowed him to control and hurt boys using pseudo-theological justifications that he needed not apply to himself – this really boiling down to the core self-serving view that 'because I am special and superior, I have the right to control and hurt them in this way'.

Religious beliefs

Beliefs can play powerful a role in abuse in various ways, for example, convincing perpetrators that their abuse is warranted or right; being used by perpetrators to convince others (victims and witnesses) that their abuse is warranted or right; and creating conditions in which it is hard to see the abuse or speak out against it. So beliefs can be directly instrumental or more broadly shape a conducive context[6]. Various beliefs that may have plausibly contributed to the initiation or continuation of Smyth's abuse through their impact upon Smyth himself or the wider community or culture at the time are summarised in Box I[7] (and some have been discussed in the context of their interplay with his narcissism above).

There were some distinct beliefs that appear to have contributed directly to Smyth's abuse, helping to justify it to himself, his victims or others[8] (related to this, see Box II for a summary of narratives Smyth deployed in service of his abuse). These views included those on leadership and on what the pathway and ambitions for Christians should comprise. As noted, within Smyth's Christian community, leadership was widely seen as a special quality that God had either gifted someone (specifically men) with or not. An aspect of this gift was the ability to spot special qualities in others. As John was denoted as one such man, these ideas meant that his 'suggestions' of beatings to young men had prima facie legitimacy, and were understood as both instructions to be followed and an honour being bestowed, narrating them as he did as flowing from his insight that they too had been 'chosen' for higher purposes. Related to this, there was also a widely held view that once someone had become a Christian, they should aim for 'full consecration' – this being a second 'work of God' in their life (following the first of becoming a Christian)[9]. Some saw this as being achieved through a life of self-discipline, austerity and sacrifice, which could work to cast out sinfulness. These beliefs, like those around leadership, of course do not provide an adequate justification for Smyth's abuse, but they were arguably critical in making his rationale appear convincing and plausible. In this process, Smyth used emotive phrases such as 'nailing one's sins to the cross' as a rhetorical bridge between this wider set of ideas and the stated purpose of the beatings.

To what extent did John Smyth believe his own justifications for the abuse? And if he did, is it possible that it was then primarily the product of a set of theological beliefs or misunderstandings? When someone espouses a set of beliefs that are clearly self-serving,

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[6] Also relevant in considerations of how beliefs can contribute to abuse is the priority that they are accorded when they come into conflict with other beliefs and values (this could also be described as how ideological they are). For example, a person may believe it is right to be loyal to your friends, but if they are placed in a situation where a child has disclosed to them that their friend has abused them, will this ideal trump their belief that children should be protected? There are many beliefs and values operating across society that are conducive to abuse when they are privileged above all else. As implied by examples in Box I, this inappropriate prioritisation of values was a factor in the continuation of Smyth's abuse and his avoidance of justice.

[7] Note that it is difficult to easily delineate the relationship between beliefs and practices (and how they are distinguishable) – this is the subject of much theological, sociological and psychological discussion. At times, a person's beliefs may be better judged by their practices than what they verbally espouse. On a related note, whilst we generally talk of belief as a categorical entity (people are seen to believe something or not), it is more accurately dimensional – people believe things to greater or lesser degrees.

[8] Note however that the 'indirect' influence of beliefs (for example, via shaping a culture) can be just as, if not more, powerful as direct influence, and this point is often missed in abuse prevention efforts.

[9] Many thanks to the reviewer who, via Keith Makin, drew my attention to this theology and its influence.

helping them achieve desired ends, it is often difficult to know the degree to which they internally hold these beliefs (versus them simply deploying these ideas strategically). In many situations it appears that a form of 'half belief' is operating, whereby people 'feel' their belief when it suits them (remembering it and finding it salient), and it fades out of consciousness when it doesn't. What seems evident is that, whether Smyth believed these ideas or not, they played their part in his abuse by supporting, legitimising and amplifying deeper driving forces, versus being the driving forces themselves. Various observations that support this contention are as follows:

- There is clear reason to believe that his behaviour was motivated by the desires for sexual gratification, sadistic gratification and/or dominance, interacting with his narcissistic traits and proclivities (as laid out above)
- He did not promote what he was doing to anyone beyond his victims; rather he sought to hide it from wider circles. If he wholly believed these practices to be right or the natural result of his community's theology, this likely would have led him to promote them to this community, persuading people of their merits.
- Nor did he seek to apply his abusive practices to anyone beyond the boys and men that he selected, groomed and coerced into them – for example, his wife and daughters were not subjected to beatings, and nor did he seek someone to beat him
- There was no clear relationship between victims' supposed wrongs and the beatings – instead the beatings followed a simple and sadly time-worn pattern of escalating abuse and coercive control
- He did not try to justify the abuse along biblical lines when it came to light
- Although he then acknowledged his 'mistaken interpretation', he rigidly persisted in beating boys
- He used different and conflicting justifications for his beating of boys in Zimbabwe compared to those in the UK, as noted above
- He ignored many parts of the Bible which would oppose such an approach

In summary (and also taking into consideration Boxes 1 and 11), the beliefs and values of the conservative evangelical community in which John Smyth operated are critical to understanding how he manipulated his victims into it, how it went on for so long, and how he evaded justice. Smyth drew on a set of beliefs that helped justify his abuse to his victims and likely also to himself. In parallel with this, his abuse is not accounted for by these beliefs (i.e. it simply being a misunderstanding or misapplication of theology) – as this analysis demonstrates, he had deeper motivations at work, and deployed numerous strategies in service of his abuse. It should also be noted that a large variety of beliefs and values (whether they be religious, political, economic or philosophical) can be conducive to abuse when they are held 'ideologically' – followed at the expense of a core care and regard for every human being.

Possible childhood contributors to John Smyth's personality and abuse

Turning to the question of why John Smyth became the person he was, and in particular, how he was motivated and capable of such horrific abuse, we must exercise some caution. First, relatively little is known about his childhood and complete conjecture does not develop our understanding. Second, at times exploring how a person's childhood has influenced them can become an exercise in removing their moral responsibility. I reject this approach and instead adopt a 'both, and' position – it is *both* the case that people's earlier life experiences affect who they are and how they behave (for example, making some wrongdoings attractive to them in a way that they would not have been otherwise) *and* we all have agency and

responsibility within our own personal matrices of motivations, proclivities, skills, understandings and feelings. The two are effectively in balance with one another – earlier experiences impact upon our moral agency, without obviating it. The brief reflections below should be read with these caveats in mind.

John Smyth grew up within an evangelical Christian family (Plymouth Brethren when they lived in Canada and then becoming more generally conservative evangelical when they moved to England when he was about seven years old). Homosexuality was seen as a sin, and men as having more authority than women, who in turn should be subservient to them – these were views that Smyth took on and expressed himself (and as noted above and in Box I, such views may have contributed to his abuse). His father is reported to have been cold and strict, promoting a 'stiff upper lip' attitude to life, and he was also a high achiever, being both a surgeon and an accomplished mountaineer. By the age of 11 years old, Smyth had been sent to a boys' boarding school. It is plausible that this childhood was conducive to the development of his narcissism – as noted, it can develop in contexts in which extrinsic achievements are over-valued and children are subjected to conditional regard (versus given general love and warmth).

It appears that Smyth was assaulted, possibly sexually, at the end of a pier when he was ten or twelve years old. Whilst the vast majority of people who are assaulted in childhood do not go on to assault others, in his case this assault might have interplayed with his developing narcissism to increase his proclivity to abuse. For example, it may have underscored a view of relationships as largely involving dominance and submission, and a concomitant desire to always aim to entrench his power (possibly as part of an attempt to assuage a deep-rooted fear of powerlessness). Given how little we know however, this is somewhat speculative.

Dynamics and spirals within the abuse of young men in the UK

John Smyth's personality, the array of strategies he deployed to achieve his abuse (see Box II), and their interaction with conducive cultural and organisational factors and how he was treated and revered (see Box 1), created a formidable invisible web in which he entrapped numerous boys and young men.

By the time Smyth approached a teenage boy with his 'invitation' (more accurately, instruction) to be beaten, he had already set them and the situation up so that they would find it very difficult to decline him[10] – and this grooming and manipulation was largely hidden so that boys would have experienced their agreement as more autonomous than it truly was. Central here was how Smyth established himself to the boys (and the wider peer group) as a Christian authority (their most important one), central to their salvation and faith, and as a father figure welcoming them into his family. In this process he drew on his charisma, intelligence, and marriage and family. And his grooming was made more effective by leaders and peers within the community buying into his projected image of himself, giving it credibility and status. In all of this, Smyth presented himself as meeting several core, unmet needs that the boys variously held: for belonging, for identity, for meaning, for love, for esteem, and for certainty. Some of these needs are especially acute during adolescence, and become more so when children are placed in boarding school - and furthermore it appears that Smyth targeted those that he perceived as having deeper unmet needs (in other words particular vulnerabilities). When he introduced the idea of the beatings, the implicit message was that these needs could only truly be met if he beat them. If boys complied, they remained God's chosen, under Smyth's authority and 'care', and within his circle of belonging, identity and

[10] It is a common strategy of sex offenders to groom their victims together with family members, local community members and institutions (McAlinden, 2006).

status. Entwined with this, they could become one of God's 'chosen within the chosen', those who were fully consecrated, sanctified, holy. If they didn't, the inference was that they were weak and sinful, and would be excluded from Smyth's and God's sphere of belonging, guidance and love (and this leading to isolation, shame, loss, and insecurity). Of course the horrific irony here is that he exacerbated the needs he presented himself as meeting, in conjunction with creating severe physical wounds and even deeper psychic ones.

Once John Smyth's abuse of the boys got underway, several spirals and dynamics are likely to have developed which helped him to maintain the abuse. An understanding of these is important in countering simplistic narratives that have been deployed which either explicitly or implicitly blame victims for not having 'said no' or walked away. The dynamics summarised here have much in common with those seen in other forms of abuse (such as domestic abuse and sexual exploitation) and are often an interplay between perpetrator behaviour and human survival, coping and adaptation under conditions of threat.[11]

A common coping mechanism that humans automatically and subconsciously deploy to survive abuse is dissociation (e.g. Kate et al., 2021; Mattos et al., 2015).[12] People can dissociate, in other words find psychological escape, from abuse in a multitude of ways – for example, they may dissociate during the abuse by cutting off from their physical feelings or emotions; by blanking out; or by disconnecting from their sense of self or reality. Following the abuse, people may cut-off from their memories of the abuse, their emotions about it, and even from an understanding of it being abusive. The development of dissociative mechanisms likely enabled Smyth's victims to withstand severe beatings of increasing magnitude and lessened their in-the-moment experience of pain (whilst not the physical or psychological impact).

Whilst highly adaptive and necessary, dissociation comes at a cost[13]. It can result in numbness and fog, impairing our ability to use pain as a guide to action. Interacting with this, Smyth increased the severity of his beatings gradually, so there was no clear threshold or juncture for victims to re-assess the situation – rather, their ability to survive the last beating would have signalled to them that they could survive the next (the two often only differing slightly in degree). There was also the knowledge that others were also being beaten and complying, and the understanding that if one was to attempt escape or not comply, this would be narrated and seen by Smyth and others as weakness: an inability to withstand hardship and suffering (a failure of masculinity) – indeed, even worse, a weakness with moral and spiritual dimensions: a failure to live up to God's calling and expectation.

Further interacting with all of this are fundamental defences that humans deploy in situations of threat. We have evolved a suite of strategies to survive threat, including 'fight', 'flight', 'freeze' and 'appease' (Cantor & Price, 2007). Appeasement is a highly developed adaptation, most useful when the threat comes from a member of our own species higher in social status. It involves submissive and deferential behaviour, which is likely best enacted when victims internally feel the perpetrator deserves this deference from them – this in turn is assisted by shame (see below) and feelings of liking or loyalty towards the perpetrator (this being relevant to the development of the feelings involved in traumatic bonding and Stockholm Syndrome). It (and wider survival) may also be assisted by a common set of responses to chronic abuse:

[11] It is beyond my remit to comprehensively delineate the dynamics and impact of Smyth's abuse, and I have limited myself here to the particular form of abuse he perpetrated within the UK. In addition, every person is different and the dynamics I describe here (informed by psychological theory and research and my clinical practice) may only apply to his abuse of some of his victims (and indeed only some of the time).

[12] Note that dissociation is closely linked to shame, being often triggered by it (e.g. Dorahy et al., 2017)

[13] As is apparent, a theme throughout this section is the 'no-win' situations abuse places victims in (subconsciously needing to choose between different approaches, which each come at a cost).

taking on the perpetrator's perspective, replacing one's agency with that of the perpetrator, and becoming hyper-vigilant to them (Lahav et al., 2019, 2021). The core point here is that victims' feelings and behaviours are shaped by fundamental survival instincts[14].

Whilst appeasement, freezing and tolerance (active passivity) responses to abuse enable victims to survive, once habitual they may detract from the development of 'fight' or 'flight' responses. McCollum (2015) captures some of this in her description of survival responses to childhood abuse[15]: *'One way in which children who are abused survive is by learning how to tolerate, rather than escape from, abusive situations… they respond to danger not by getting out of it, but by staying in it, confirming the survival strategies that made them feel safe throughout their childhood: that they are tough enough to take it, or that it is really not so bad'.*

Following on from these dynamics, Smyth's abuse, coercion and manipulation set up a vicious spiral in which his power and agency increased whilst that of his victims diminished. Each beating, on a primal level, signalled to both him and his victim his power and their submission, likely making further obedience to him more likely. Victims' survival reinforced the value of appeasement. And each time a victim tried to make it stop but was unable to break free, this entrenched further the feeling that attempts at escape are futile. What can emerge then is a feeling of being able to survive the abuse, but not escape it.

As noted, as part of these dynamics, Smyth's beatings likely embedded shame within many of his victims. At its heart, shame is a feeling of being defective or 'less than' in the eyes of others or oneself, and it is thought to be adaptive in driving appeasement and hiding behaviours when these are needed (Gilbert, 1998). When people feel ashamed, they feel less worthy of respectful treatment (beatings may seem more deserved), they feel less empowered, they are less likely to seek help (fearing further shaming from others), and they may be less likely to give their core thoughts and feelings due regard. Note that various aspects of the abuse likely compounded feelings of shame such as the enforced nudity, loss of control of bladder or bowels, and the use of adult nappies. Linking this with a point made above, Smyth's victims were caught in a highly distressing double-bind of shame – the beatings felt shaming, but they knew that to not comply would have also resulted in their shaming by Smyth. Once shame is entrenched, it can be difficult to shake-off and many victims of abuse endure it within themselves for decades following.

Further working to diminish victims' agency was Smyth's projection and narration of the abuse as beyond any of their power, as if it was something that had to happen, ordained by God, just like days of the week. Victims found themselves trapped into a regimented routine, where, whilst some debate over 'when' might happen, there was seemingly no way of debating 'if'. The next beating was invariably going to have to happen, it was pre-ordained, just as night follows day. In this mentality, victims' perceived window of action becomes very narrow. They cannot see a way of escaping a beating but they may be able to affect when a beating occurs, so they may come to focus their will on this – and ironically (and adaptively) may seek an earlier rather than later beating to escape the rising anticipatory terror they are feeling and to reach the relief stage. Opponent Process Theory (Solomon, 1980) is relevant here – in short, this states that an affective state (pleasant or unpleasant) is followed by a secondary 'opponent process', it's opposite, designed to restore equilibrium, and that after repeated

[14] These we have little conscious awareness of, and so they can be misunderstood and wrongly judged according to the (pseudo-)'rationality' of late modern society, versus with an appreciation of their core, highly evolved functions.

[15] As is implicit in the above, this also has applicability to adults when endangered by perpetrators with higher status and power (including the perceived power to meet fundamental needs).

exposure, the primary process often becomes weaker and the opponent process stronger. So in this abuse situation, the relief victims feel after a beating[16] may start to be experienced as 'outweighing' the pain – as noted, the possibility of experiencing neither is not visible or within reach.

Final dynamics necessitating mention here are 'betrayal blindness' and self-blame, and their respective protective functions. Betrayal Trauma Theory (DePrince et al., 2012) describes how people may subconsciously reduce their awareness of abuse by a person that they are invested in trusting in – this enables them to continue in a relationship that they perceive to be vital to them in some way (relating to an existential need for safety, meaning, belonging etc.). The abuse may be blocked out from awareness, or more subtly, may not negatively shift the victim's perception of the abuser – they are still seen as fundamentally good or as having the best interests of the victim at heart. This is more likely felt when the abuser is not only a source of danger, but is also a source of comfort or protection (perceived or actual). This characterises the situation with Smyth, given how he narrated it as something he kindly did in his victims' best interests, and his subsequent care and tending of their wounds.

Self-blame is a highly prevalent response to abuse, and again this can be understood as, in part, an adaptive strategy. Whilst it is highly aversive, this felt belief may protect victims against feelings that are subconsciously feared to be worse, such as those of powerlessness, injustice, grief, betrayal and rage (along the lines of, felt implicitly: *if it was my fault: then I can do things differently to avoid it happening again; then my world isn't a deeply unfair place where horrific things happen to good people; then they didn't completely betray me or wish me harm*). Others who learn of the abuse may also engage in victim-blaming in order to protect their sense of their world as largely fair and their own sense of safety (Hafer & Bègue, 2005) – although, unlike self-blame, this position carries a moral dimension, given the ways in which it ironically contributes to injustice towards others, and compounds the impact of the abuse.

Moving beyond victim-blame (whether by themselves or others) involves living in a world of shattered assumptions – a world in which those whom we intimately trust can betray us; in which horrific things happen to good people; and in which, as a result, we are all vulnerable to being profoundly hurt and harmed by other people. The challenge for us all is to face this reality, whilst also holding onto truths of human goodness and grounds for hope – this providing the necessary starting point for change. In the words of James Baldwin, *'not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced'*.

[16] It should be noted that this relief is not merely an opponent process, but also tied to the knowledge that the next beating is no longer imminent.

Organisational and cultural factors that may have assisted or contributed to John Smyth's abuse

The interacting beliefs and practices listed below I identify as common within the conservative evangelical community in which John Smyth operated, however many were (or are) also present in the wider Church and/or British society – indeed most communities do not operate in a vacuum and beliefs they hold are given legitimacy and strength by wider circles. In parallel with this, it seems that this community drew on societal privilege and notions of status to rationalise a sense of specialness and separation from others, and this in turn enabled beliefs to remain or grow that were out of step with the direction of travel in wider society.

- Hierarchical social structure in which status is important and requires continual proving (contributing to circles within circles)
- Authoritarian culture in which leaders are seen as being on a moral high-ground and people are taught to trust them above their own intuitions
- Obedience and loyalty highly valued in those judged as subordinates; a culture of deference to those with perceived status
- A focus on personal sinfulness, producing a default sense of guilt, defectiveness, submission and indebtedness to God
- 'Muscular Christianity' in which a version of masculinity involving endurance, toughness, and suppression of vulnerability ('stiff upper lip') is valorised
- Interacting with this, a theology which emphasises a journey towards greater (or even full) godliness or holiness via self-sacrifice, hardship and discipline (such ideas were promoted by the Higher Life movement influential in Iwerne and related circles at the time)
- Following on from the above, high value is placed on: hardship and sacrifice; dominant leadership styles; rhetorical skill; and masculinity as narrated above. In contrast qualities and behaviours such as emotional literacy and attunement, kindness, openness, and collaboration (those often seen as feminine) are demoted
- Elitism and electism: beliefs that individuals within the community are special, chosen and superior to those outside of it who lack knowledge, understanding and God's approval
- Misogyny and patriarchy: men are seen as in authority over women – whilst men and women are said to be equal before God, men are granted more power than women and treated as having more wisdom and insight. As a result Smyth's behaviour and justifications may have been given more legitimacy; his focus on young men was not questioned; and potentially valuable perspectives from women were absent
- The moral code is not tied to principles of fairness and harm, and therefore things like masturbation are placed in the same category of 'sin' as actions that clearly hurt others
- Related, lines are drawn between those who repent and believe versus those who do not, rather than lines being drawn on the morality or otherwise of behaviour. As a result, Smyth's supposed repentance may have been given too much weight in decision-making, rather than the focus being on his pattern of criminal behaviour

- Intrusive and intense one-to-one mentoring of boys and young men in which, to a degree, they are objectified and instrumentalized (i.e. they are related to in large part because they are a means to an end)
- High value placed on loyalty to the group (related to loyalty to leaders noted above). Controversies are undignified and to be avoided.
- Related, priority given to converting people and, relatedly, to reputation. In safeguarding situations these values are often (in the short-term) in conflict with the goals of protection and justice.
- Boarding school culture and practices, in which children are separated from their families for long periods of time and therefore come to lack strong, secure attachments and an understanding of healthy relationships. This can make them more vulnerable to abuse, especially when perpetrated by someone in the guise of a 'father figure'
- Practice and approval of physical punishment, so that his abuse could be justified or narrated as the harsh end of something legitimate
- A neglect of safeguarding and an ignorance about abuse and its dynamics

Box 1: Organisational and cultural factors that may have assisted John Smyth's abuse starting and/or continuing

Strategies that John Smyth deployed to achieve his abuse and avoid censure

- Targeting boys and young men who he perceived to have vulnerabilities (for example, the absence of strong attachment figures)
- Grooming them by praising them and giving them the sense that they were special and chosen (by Smyth and by God), and through the (deceptive) provision of belonging, certainty, identity, and a caring father figure
- Abusing in such a way that he could hide behind justifications and argue the abuse's legality (for example, waiting until boys were 16 years old)
- The use of his wife in tending to victims following and supplying bandages, which likely contributed to normalising the abuse and giving it legitimacy (i.e. hiding it's abusive nature)
- Locating and fomenting sources of shame (such as masturbation)
- Repeated, pressurizing persuasion
- Use of words and phrases which engender compliance in victims and others through the emotions they evoke (such as guilt and shame) whilst being empty of real meaning and/or their validity is never explained (such as 'nailing sins to the cross' and 'loyalty')
- Threats and blackmail (for example, when a boy disclosed a minor theft, Smyth threatened him with abuse or reporting: 'we can deal with this one of two ways')
- Authoritarian demands to secrecy
- Denigration and whittling away victims' self-confidence (in part so that they were less likely to trust their feelings and use them as a guide to action)
- Isolating victims (for example judgement of romantic relationships and relationships with people who were not Christians)
- Implied threat of social ostracism (if victims did not comply, they would be cast out of this inner circle of status and belonging)
- Gradually shifting the rationale – initially beatings seemed tied to particular wrongdoings, so victims may have felt some control, but over time they came to have increasingly abstract justifications – there was clearly nothing victims could do to decrease them
- Gradual escalation – there was no clear threshold for victims to judge they could take no more, rather the survival of the last beating signalled they could survive the next
- Provision of comfort following the beatings, entrenching himself as both his victims' source of danger and source of comfort/rescue, their 'everything'
- Surveilling and monitoring, for example intrusive and controlling questions to victims about their lives and using them to surveil one another
- Building abuse into a regime or routine, to normalise it and reduce victims' sense of choice or agency (because it is scripted as expected, a 'given', on particular days)

Narratives he deployed, and projected versions of himself, his victims, God and the world

- He narrated himself as spiritual authority and God's spokesman and mediator (for example, he placed himself as the means by which victims get to God and he spoke as God – 'the Lord is looking for more'; and he narrated acceptance of the abuse as an indicator of faith)

- He spoke of the beatings as a pathway to spiritual growth and a sign of commitment to God – what God wants, and concomitantly, refusal to be beaten was weakness, and a pathway to corruption
- He spoke of the beatings and negotiated with boys about how many lashes they would have *as if he had no choice in doing them* (only over their number), conveying the sense that he was just God's vessel, without full agency
- He spoke of himself beating the boys because he loved and cared for them; delivering the beatings was a sacrifice he made, part of his commitment to God
- He projected a sense of omniscience (with comments such as 'I can see masturbation in people's eyes')
- Victims were narrated as being sinful and disobedient (whilst in parallel there was a lack of clarity on how to stop being so to avoid beatings)
- In Zimbabwe, beatings were, at different points, narrated as discipline or a game
- He used religious reasoning and parts of the Bible to narrate as sinful any challenges to his abuse and speaking out about it; he also used these to pressure people into forgiveness

Style

- Extremely confident, including in his use of justifications
- Authoritarian and controlling
- Charismatic and persuasive
- Brazen – for example in Zimbabwe he hid his abuse in plain sight
- Hostile, aggressive, derogatory and threatening at points when challenged
- At other points, seemingly feigned conciliatory behaviour and remorse

Box II: Strategies and justifications that John Smyth deployed to achieve his abuse and avoid censure[17]

[17] This list is not meant to be exhaustive, and nor is it meant to imply that John Smyth used all of these strategies and justifications all of the time. Rather, he deployed them flexibly according to the situation – indeed as outlined, at different points he used different justifications that contradicted one another.

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