

# Dying to live: Youth violence and the mumpain

The Sociological Review

1–16

© The Author(s) 2019

Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/0038026119842012

[journals.sagepub.com/home/sor](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/sor)**Yusef Bakkali**

Birmingham City University, UK

## Abstract

This article engages with accounts of the everyday experiences of young adults living in London who have been involved with road life (street culture) and how their narratives might help us to better understand issues of youth violence in the UK. Through an exploration of their experiences, this article argues that deeply embedded structural contradictions are leaving a generation of marginalised young people *dying to live* as they become locked in an existential struggle against a sense of malaise permeating many of their everyday experiences. These experiences of social suffering are conceptualised through ‘the mumpain’. The mumpain is a psychosocial concept which articulates the impact of structurally routed violence, inherent in late-modern neoliberal states, within the everyday lives of marginalised young adults living in a contemporary urban context. This article draws on interview data from two young men, Stephen and T, who have both been victims of knife crime and have spent much of their lives involved with youth groups self-identifying as gangs. In this article, I demonstrate some of the often unspoken struggles that saturate their lives. These experiences induce agentic responses as people seek to alleviate their suffering, at times affecting them in ways that lead to acts of violence. Moreover, I also elaborate on the inductive methodological approach employed to denote how ‘the mumpain’ was developed while working alongside marginalised young adults.

## Keywords

gangs, mumpain, road culture, violence, youth

## Introduction

This article draws attention to how structural processes are articulated through experiences of pain and malaise in the lives of two young men living on London council estates. These men professed a connection to ‘road life’, a UK-specific form of street culture. They have also been both victims and perpetrators of violent crime. In this article I argue that, although street violence is a factor shaping the behaviours of those on road, it is

---

### Corresponding author:

Yusef Bakkali, Birmingham City University, C303 Curzon Building, 4 Cardigan Street, Birmingham, B4 7BD, UK.

Email: [Yusef.Bakkali@bcu.ac.uk](mailto:Yusef.Bakkali@bcu.ac.uk)

important to understand participants in relation to a broader context of structural violence (Galtung, 1969) where social location shapes agency and provides the impetus for strategies pursued to alleviate feelings of social suffering. The term used to describe these experiences of suffering is the *munpain* – a portmanteau of pain and mundane. A central element of the *munpain* is that it describes situations of everyday suffering that are structurally routed: meaning that the ‘pain’ described bears the ‘impression’ (Ahmed, 2013) of wider structural forces despite appearing not to have a specific cause or thought to be the result of some individual deficit. Theorising the *munpain* at this time of growing moral panic around the prevalence of youth violence in the UK (Perera, 2018; Stone, 2018) is important as there is a need for dialogue around less spectacular yet more pervasive forms of violence operating in the everyday lives of young people.

## Road life

Road culture should be understood as a UK-specific street cultural formation (Gunter, 2008, 2010). It draws upon some of the cultural symbols of Black Atlantic popular culture (Gilroy, 1993) such as dress, lexicon and popular forms of musical expression (e.g. rap and hip-hop music originating in the USA and Caribbean). Defining road culture in racial terms, however, should be approached with caution as it ‘cuts across ethnicity and gender’ (Gunter & Watt, 2008, p. 520). As with other street cultural formations, road life can be viewed as an expressive and material response amongst marginalised sections of the population to cultivate alternative forms of value, in spaces adjacent to the dominant value system that subordinates them (Ilan, 2015). Hallsworth and Silverstone (2009, p. 362), in their study of firearm offenders, found participants vividly describing lives lived on the violent margins of road life. This led them to describe it as a ‘violent and volatile social milieu’. Whilst these findings are informative and in line with many of the depictions of road life in popular discourse (for example the television series *Top Boy* aired on Channel 4), wider ethnographic and narrative-based studies on road life have demonstrated a more multifaceted, nuanced and complex street cultural configuration.

Gunter (2010) emphasised that the marginal spaces where road culture has developed tend to be (often socially maligned) inner city council estates. Spaces where generations of multi-ethnic, working class young people have forged and negotiated urban identities in the midst of relative deprivation and ever-changing global cities. Because of this, road culture is predominantly concerned with the ‘mundane’ practices of urban life (Gunter, 2010) such as leisure, friendship, love and material survival. Indeed, it was through engaging with young people around issues of the prosaic that the *munpain* began to take shape.

The *munpain* developed through extended engagement with narrative accounts of young adults who identified with life on road. It was theorised through careful consideration of the ways structural conditions create deep-set contradictions that filter into participants’ everyday experiences, via troubling feelings and events. These experiences are embedded in epistemological and structural contradictions bound by global and local inequalities which underpin the status quo (Littler, 2013; Mignolo, 2011), including issues relating but not limited to colonial legacies, racial injustice, patriarchy, social class, disability, sexuality and citizenship. My aim is to draw scholarly attention to the

importance of this kind of social suffering, suggesting that both everyday routines and spectacular acts of violence look different when examined through its lens.

This article will begin by expounding neoliberalism's global reach and examining some of the wider research that seeks to trace the impact of these structural conditions on human wellbeing. This is followed by a methodological account of the research design, explaining the ways in which inductive style research and sensitising work (Blumer, 1954) were required to gain the necessary insight for the development of this new theory. The article will then proceed to examine accounts from T and Stephen to illustrate how the *munpain* operates in the lives of young men on road. Finally, the article will conclude by highlighting how understanding issues such as youth violence has to be done in a way that remains grounded in the social locations and perspectives, of both victims and perpetrators, in order for intellectual progress or meaningful policy intervention to be possible.

### **The late neoliberal conjuncture: Making people sick**

Understanding the relationship between wider structures and people's lifeworlds involves critical engagement with both spheres. Understanding the *munpain* and its impact on youth violence involves thinking conjuncturally (Hall et al., 2013): understanding the variant material, historical and discursive threads which have led to and are encapsulated in a 'ruptural unity' (Althusser, 1969, cited in Hall et al., 2013) embodied in the body politic during a particular period. Locating the young men here in the context of the present late neoliberal conjuncture requires an intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 1989). This is essential in helping to interpret and untangle the threads of older classed, racialised and gendered forms of domination in relation to more emergent (though perhaps not exactly new) globalising logics and forces of capital.

In the present conjuncture, neoliberalism is widely regarded as the dominant ideological paradigm organising global logics of capitalism (Hall et al., 2013; Harvey, 2007a). Neoliberalism is understood to have been first actualised in policy during the 'Thatcher/Reagan revolutions' (Harvey, 2007a), having been initiated in Britain and America respectively during the late 1970s. The tenets of neoliberal thinking have extended around the world with governments in both the global north and south, as well as senior figures in global financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, all adopting associated approaches (Harvey, 2007a). These values broadly include the promotion of free-market fundamentalism with minimal state intervention aside from the maintenance of institutions working to secure private property rights and functioning markets, such as the military, judiciary and police force (Harvey, 2007a). Additionally, a process which Harvey (2007b) has termed 'creative destruction' sees governments often attempting to actively initiate the creation of markets in sectors where previously none existed, such as healthcare, prisons and social welfare. This entails stripping back state social security services in favour of more limited private alternatives, often combining these with marketised security-orientated responses to social problems, often utilising the criminal justice system as a solution to social problems (Giroux, 2013; Wacquant, 2009).

One of the most notable features of the late neoliberal conjuncture has been the exponential upward redistribution of capital (Piketty, 2014), with income and wealth inequality increasing to levels not seen since before the Second World War (Hall et al., 2013). Since

the 2008 financial crisis the IMF, European Central Bank and European Commission have all been advocating for the deepening of neoliberal logics, in the form austerity, as a solution to the rising public debt and slow growth caused by the recession (Labonté & Stuckler, 2016). Austerity has been politically marketed as a package of necessarily radical cuts to public services and government to prevent further financial meltdown in ‘challenging’ economic times (Peck, 2012). It has been noted, however, that the adoption of austerity in the UK has been disproportionate, with the poor and lower-to-mid income strata of society bearing the brunt of the cutbacks to public services, whilst the rich have received tax breaks and other financial incentives to ‘do business’ (Schrecker & Bamba, 2015).

This continued deepening of neoliberalism has had many deleterious consequences for populations both globally and in the UK, including those on road. Public health specialists and demographers have played an important role in charting some of these effects on wellbeing. Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) most famously observed connections between higher levels of inequality in a given society and poorer health outcomes across the entire population. Nations with lower inequality fared better with superior health outcomes across the board when compared with states following more aggressive neoliberal reforms. Schrecker and Bamba (2015) describe the spread of four forms of ‘neoliberal epidemic’: obesity, insecurity, austerity and inequality, which have harmful implications for wellbeing and morbidity. They argue that these were spread across the globe, as a result of the global financial consensus, at such speed and extent that they need to be considered threats to public health of epidemic proportions. One of the key causal factors in this process was said to be increased levels of stress in response to the insecurity caused by the neoliberal onslaught. This includes issues like declining pay and conditions alongside the hardship wrought by punitive domestic social policy in the form of austerity.

In their more recent work, Wilkinson and Pickett (2018) similarly observe harmful psychological and psychosocial effects underpinned by neoliberal societies’ high levels of inequality. This includes heightened levels of anxiety, depression, social isolation and narcissism. These social demographic studies highlight the tensions between the prioritisation of market logics and ways of organising a society best suited to human wellbeing. In many ways, these are contemporary articulations of older questions posed about capitalism and human nature (Fromm, 1956/2002), utilising more late-modern metrics and perhaps slightly less radical alternative propositions. This reflection on wellbeing and capitalism, however, cannot be the extent of the conversation, as the neoliberal consensus did not form in a vacuum. Indeed, the aforementioned ‘ruptural unity’ underpinning the contemporary neoliberal status quo has articulated itself to, often much older, existing hierarchies and inequalities in uneven ways (Hall et al., 2013).

bell hooks (1992) uses the phrase *white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy* to elucidate the multiple forms of domination functioning in a messy combination across western societies. These multiple experiences of domination have shown to be exacerbated in manifold ways by the continued advancement of neoliberal capitalism. This makes theorising around social suffering in contemporary urban settings a complex and elusive process, as the many longstanding legacies of colonialism, racialisation, social class, sexuality and patriarchy (to name but a few) become matted into a complex portrait of existence and domination within the context of the present conjuncture.

It is undoubtedly the case that these older social divisions, many of which stretch back to times before neoliberalism, have legacies still active in contemporary lifeworlds remaining latent in some contexts. Many studies have displayed the ways in which these structures mediate the way people feel and experience the world. Gail Lewis (2009), for example, offers a reflexive auto-ethnographic account of the ways racialised discourses permeate the most intimate sphere: reflecting on the ambivalence in the love between herself (a mixed race child and later woman) and her white mother. Structural inequalities do not exclusively exist *out there*, but are part of our internal worlds, entrenched in the fine grain experiences of those on the margins.

Diane Reay (2005) also provides a vocabulary for the emotional life of the excluded in her attempts to convey the emotional experiences bound up in class-based positionalities. Imogen Tyler (2013) uses the term 'social abjection' to capture this interplay of personal and political forces, highlighting the pressures of enduring relative poverty in a rich, increasingly neoliberal society. The *munpain* is offered as part of this psychosocial turn within sociology, connecting the interior emotional realms of the individual to broader macro processes. It borrows from newer understandings of wellbeing and sickness relating to heightened material and cultural forms of inequality along with older accounts of lives under colonial, classed and patriarchal domination. Most of all it seeks to take a grounded approach and reach outwards from the perspectives and social locations of young adults on road. This involves searching for often tacit sets of meanings and connecting them to structural processes that inflict harm and suffering in the everyday lives of those engaged in road life. In the following section, this article will seek to expand upon the inductive approach to the research design that helped to facilitate this grounded perspective.

## **Sensitising concepts, inductive research and the *munpain***

The research project on road life (Bakkali, 2018), which this article is based on, was inductive in design. This means that the theoretical and thematic focus of the research emerged largely from the data as opposed to preconceived theories or ideas being imposed upon it or tested against it (Patton, 1990). The data were collected through ethnographic interview encounters (Heyl, 2001) which were largely unstructured. Participants were invited to 'tell me how it all began' (usually leading to respondents elaborating on the circumstances of their birth) as a first prompt in interviews, which then proceeded to roughly follow a biographical narrative construction. This open and explorative style is strongly associated with ethnographic interviews: a method which demands that researchers establish 'respectful, ongoing relationships' with participants, allowing sufficient time to build enough 'rapport for there to be a genuine exchanges ... and openness ... to explore purposefully with the researcher the meanings they place in their worlds' (Heyl, 2001, p. 369).

My own positionality helped to facilitate this process. Having grown up in a council flat in south London, I have relationships with most of my participants that precede and extend beyond the research process. This insider perspective (Hodkinson, 2005; MacRae, 2007; Taylor, 2011) aided in engaging in frank and productive interviews. The interview component of the study consisted of 12 biographical narrative interviews with young adults who had spent at least part of their trajectories 'on the roads'.

A purposeful sampling approach was developed utilising my insider knowledge and networks to select an intensity sample (Patton, 1990). Intensity sampling seeks to purposefully identify rich examples relevant to the research interest, but instead of seeking to capture only extreme or unusual cases, it tries to find cases of adequate depth and breadth to give a broader understanding across the spectrum of a phenomenon. In this case, it was utilised to select individuals who had spent time on road but varied in their levels of involvement, family lives, education, gender and trajectories. It was also about selecting participants who had 'rich' narratives that they were willing to share. This meant accessing gang active participants as well as university graduates (ranging from Oxbridge to former polytechnics). This breadth of sampling was theoretically rationalised in relation to Gunter's (2008) road culture continuum. This follows the logic that a majority of young people do not occupy the 'spectacular' or violent (Gunter, 2008) end of road life, thus any attempt to direct the study exclusively towards this extreme would distort the findings, eclipsing the majority experiences of life on road.

As the interview process developed, participants spoke at length about their feelings of frustration and malaise in everyday social situations. The *munpain* emerged from the data and was incubated in the form of a 'sensitising concept' (Blumer, 1954). This borrows from the grounded theoretical approach (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) where 'interpretive devices' provide reflexive footholds in the data, enabling the researcher to develop 'a deep understanding of social phenomena' (Bowen, 2006, p. 20). By tracing the *munpain* I followed threads of meaning that connect people's everyday accounts of frustration and suffering with broader structural and historical tensions that saturate the social world. This sense of malaise is not just a 'symptom', therefore, but also a driver of action, as young people work tirelessly to mitigate their sense of suffering within the confines of their limiting social contexts. In contrast to increasingly psychological and epidemiological approaches, I suggest that the *munpain* could provide a new kind of psychosocial approach that reorients the discussions around youth violence away from a focus on both moral panics and deficit models (Case, 2006). This involves engaging seriously with young people's accounts of the emotional and practical struggles of everyday existence. The development of new theory in this area was dependent on the use of inductive reasoning. Without thinking and talking reflexively with the participants of this study to understand the subtler tacit details of their accounts, the nuances in their biographical narratives would have likely been overlooked. The *munpain* seeks to help to provide a theoretical language for the structurally routed violence saturating the prosaic experiences of participants' lives.

What follows are the accounts of two young men, Stephen and T, both of whom were in their early twenties at the time of interview. They are both children of migrant parents, with their respective families having origins in Nigeria and Colombia. Both have histories of gang activity and involvement in violent crime. Since their early teens both have been involved in various gang incarnations comprised of a collective of young men who grew up living on and around several neighbouring south London council estates. Their neighbourhood collective has achieved a degree of notoriety both locally and nationally, finding themselves featured heavily in both print media and on screen in policing documentaries. Both men have themselves been victims of knife crime, each having been stabbed on one or more occasions.

## Meditations on the munpain

Road life carries strong associations with low-level violent crime (Hallsworth, 2013). This was present in the narrative accounts of participants, with stories of neighbourhood life commonly emblazoned with episodes of hyper-violence. However, there was an apparent undercurrent running throughout and between these spectacular tales of excitement and trauma. Indeed, the everyday angst generated from the experience of urban marginality led to concerns that straddled the prosaic and existential. It was these reflections from participants that began to demand rigorous theoretical attention be paid to the connections between the structural, existential and mundane, in relation to issues like youth violence.

In the extract below, Stephen and I were having a conversation relating to his experiences of violence on road. Stephen has a local reputation for being capable of effectively utilising violence; however, he was not overly concerned with regaling me with tales of his triumphant hyper-masculine exploits. In fact, he used the interview to encourage me to understand how he has made meaning of his life in the context of a street world saturated with violence; starved of meaningful alternative opportunities. An example of this can be found below as he muses on some of his own existential meditations after being stabbed:

- Yusef: I hear that, is it common, in your life have you had people pull knives or guns on you?
- Stephen: Yeah ... yeah ...
- Yusef: How did you feel when that happened?
- Stephen: I don't know I just had to react init like I-I been stabbed twice so I know how it feels and all that ...
- Yusef: Do you feel lucky that you survived?
- Stephen: Yeah, you have to, 'cause you never know that could have been the last time-that's what I'm saying all this-a next person taking your life, why does he deserve-he's not God, he don't deserve to do all of them stuff, no man, no matter if you believe in God or not, no other person deserves to take your life, that's *your life*.

Here Stephen shows a deeper concern with both his own and broader entitlements to life. Stephen has experienced the loss of numerous close peers to gun and knife violence, in addition to his own direct experiences of violence. Accumulative experiences such as these can lead to young people on the margins experiencing devaluation – materially, symbolically and physically. Young marginalised men are widely reported to be the most common victims of violent crime (Hall, 2002), reflecting the low value placed on their bodies in a wider structural sense. When trying to understand youth violence the everyday experiences of various kinds of violence and devaluing work that underpins them must be at the centre of our understanding. As a theoretical tool, the munpain helps us understand how these pains are experienced and how those who suffer them struggle for dignity.

My approach also involved interrogating silences (Glynn, 2014). The munpain is not visibly uniform; instead, it is insidious, forcing its way into the quiet places of a person's

life and often manifesting around their fears and insecurities. Due to issues of stigma attached to experiences of suffering, intimate accounts could be communicated in a dis-associated way. T, however, on a few occasions broached this head on. Rather than engaging in typical tropes associated with gang involvement such as hyper-violence, T alluded to a different kind of social suffering based on his everyday experiences of trying to get by living on a south London council estate. He focused on moments of reflection and social interaction that often did not contain any speech or explicit drama:

T: Everybody's broke, struggling, the pain, it's just pain man. Pain can be-it's pain, everything's pain, you wake up one day and then you find out that you got a fucking congestion fine for £65 and then on top of that you're on bail and then on top of that there's no toothpaste, it's more pain, you gotta break in to another tenner-you know what I mean it's just pain, all angles, so that's pain man. Everything's pain in London, everything's pain ... That pain is just no money, then there's a lot of things to do, angles to go to, clubs, parties, you got no money to go, no clothes to go, that's *paaaaiin, paaaiin*. Then on top of that you got to go sign on Jobcentre, the girl you just spoke to last week that you told you own a BMW, she's just seen you in the Jobcentre, that's *PAAAAIIIIINN* ... Then they sanction you when you're late, give you more pain, put you in rent arrears, it's just more pain, then you have to phone people, say can I borrow some money, then you pay your rent, then that person's phoning you know saying 'where the fuck's my money?' It's pain more pain, the pain don't stop, it just continues, *pain, pain every day*.

A strong theme emerging from conversations in this study was that of aspiration – with both material and symbolic success sought after. T, like others in the study, was part of the generation growing up under New Labour and later successive Conservative-led governments that worked to raise aspirations in schools (Spohrer, 2016). Such aspirations were underpinned by neoliberal values of meritocracy and equality of opportunity. The raising of aspirations, however, has been implemented against a backdrop of existing structural inequalities, offering a 'cruel optimism' (Berlant, 2011) for young people from marginalised backgrounds, by heightening the social expectation for success whilst transferring the responsibility for any failings to the individual. This represents one of the most acutely felt (and perhaps most contemporary) contradictions which emerged in the lives of those involved in road life, as they struggled to realise their lofty aspirations and worked every day to mitigate perceived individual failings.

The enforcement of this *cruel optimism* has been argued to be legitimising work: offering little material possibility, instead justifying and naturalising a status quo built on centuries of existing inequalities (Reay, 2017). These social policy 'sticking plasters' (Schrecker & Bambra, 2015, p. 112) exacerbate the munpain by adding to the toxic mix of existing contradictions and consequentially intensifying young people's sense of malaise through their experience of impotence, as they search for meaningful futures.

Indeed, if we contextualise T's account against the backdrop of the recent Conservative and Coalition governments' welfare reforms these contradictions become clearer. Increased conditionality (Hancock & Mooney, 2013) has been accompanied by a widespread political and media-based moral panic (Cohen, 2002) surrounding access to welfare, with folk devils often painted in the form of 'benefit scroungers' (Hancock & Mooney, 2013). We can visualise a kind of pincer move on poverty, or more precisely

poor people, who are being both materially and ontologically flattened. The material support available is becoming limited whilst poor people are the ones blamed for their circumstances, and their ‘dependency’ on welfare. This is reflected in a report by the Centre for Social Justice which equates poverty to a ‘state of mind’:

As the fabric of society crumbles at the margins what has been left behind is an underclass, where life is characterised by dependency, addiction, debt and family breakdown. ... [T]he inner city wasn’t a place; it was a state of mind – there is a mentality of entrapment, where aspiration and hope are for other people, who live in another place. (Duncan-Smith, 2007, pp. 4–5, cited in Slater, 2014, p. 961)

This short extract is clear in directing blame for the struggles of those on the margins for the lack of moral fortitude of its inhabitants – the so-called ‘*underclass*’. Shildrick (2018) describes political posturing like this as forming a part of a wider strategy of ‘poverty propaganda’: processes whereby more powerful groups assign responsibility for gross levels of inequality to deficiencies amongst vulnerable and marginalised populations, therefore serving to legitimise and naturalise the status quo. Such narratives make waves: for instance, the shame T feels when his heightened levels of aspiration are met with a limited material reality, lead to a stretching and ripping of the fabric of his sense of self. Schrecker and Bamba (2015) denote that this suffering is designed into welfare apparatus. They cite the work of Charles Murray (1984), an author connected to the influential right-wing think tank the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research (MI). MI, similarly to the Centre for Social Justice, was concerned by the supposed existence of an ‘underclass’, whom, it argued, posed a threat to the status quo due to their inability to hold a stake at neoliberalism’s winners’ table (Wacquant, 2009). Subsequently, this underclass must be punitively managed to fulfil their economic function at the insecure lower end of the job market, meaning that life on welfare must be made ‘so uncomfortable that any job will be preferable’ (Murray, 1984, pp. 176–177, cited in Schrecker & Bamba, 2015, p. 72).

Possibly the most pertinent moment of humiliation for T was the thought of being spotted coming out of the Jobcentre by a woman. The vivid character of this scenario calls to mind the famous instance of humiliation describe by Franz Fanon in *Black Skins, White Masks*, one which caused Fanon himself to ‘burst apart ... [with] the fragments ... put together again by another self’ (Fanon, 1952, p. 82). Like T, Fanon describes a moment of interaction: he is looked upon by an Other – a white child. The context of this story was his own personal migration to France, from a middle class family in Martinique, where he claimed he was not made acutely aware of his ‘blackness’. It was only within the social context of French society where the colour of his skin was endowed with this conception of blackness that he realised that the history of western racial injustice had become tied to his own pigmentation:

‘Look, a Negro!’ ... ‘Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened!’ ...

... On that day, completely dislocated, unable to be abroad with the other, the white man, who unmercifully imprisoned me, I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object. (Fanon, 1952, pp. 84–85)

Whilst it is not the intention here to conflate issues surrounding racism and class-based inequality, I do believe there is a similarity in the processes captured in T's and Fanon's stories. T fears losing control of the selfhood he presents to the world. The postmodern privilege of identity construction can be denied him, leaving him stripped down to be viewed as abject. For Fanon it was only at this moment that he understood himself to be black in the context of colonial discourse – classified through the eyes of a white child; and at that moment denied the subjecthood that he had previously taken for granted. What I am arguing here is that the historical and present structures of representation seep deep into everyday life, causing distress and destruction. Fanon could not control the sets of meanings, with their bloodied history, which were connected to the colour of his skin, in an analogous way to T losing control of how he is seen. Indeed, the gendered dimension of this story highlights how this issue pervades the intimate sphere affecting experiences of love and desire.

In the material world, T belongs to a subcultural group who have limited access to stable, well-paid legitimate employment (Gunter & Watt, 2009). It has also been observed that the most desirable jobs and opportunities available tend to go to those born into higher socio-economic positions, as evidenced by the almost total cessation in social mobility (OECD, 2010; Reay, 2013) and the cementing and expansion of inequality (Atkinson, 2015; Harvey, 2007a). The creative destruction (Harvey, 2007b) which has taken place in the wake of Coalition and Conservative welfare reforms is the destruction of poorer people's self-esteem and status, forcing people into an existential battle for value. Silence also rose from other related places where the social expectation on the individual repressed their inner suffering. In the next section, I will work with a discussion that took place with Stephen about the psychological costs of road life, during which he opened up about some of the ways in which masculine performativity affects people in very private ways.

### *A race of angels*

In this interview extract, Stephen and I were discussing the effect of accumulative experiences of violence in the community. Prior to this conversation, we had been discussing the possibility of young men on road suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, as has been indicated to being the case amongst young black and brown people in deprived areas in the USA (Fitzpatrick, 1993). Stephen proceeded to again draw focus away from hyper-violence back towards more tacit pressures affecting the mental health and wellbeing of young men on road:

Stephen: *A lot of people do still.* Like there's a lot of people on road, like they might have that bravado like 'yeah reh reh reh' the tough guy, but when the lights go out it's just them and their thoughts and it can turn people crazy still, and I've seen it turn people crazy and they might feel depressed and, but people don't know that, and people just be like they be thinking like, like I said the whole road man joke, when people be running jokes I kinda get angry so like, you don't know what these people are going through, you lot just think it's a joke, joke, joke, joke,

they'll shed light on stupid stuff but these stuff, there's a lot of people-I know a lot of people who go through that.

- Yusef: So you think on the roads it can be emotionally draining?
- Stephen: Yeah 'cause they don't feel-there's a lot of people that like they can't, there might be nobody they can talk to, you know what I mean? They might tell their bredrin-their friend like 'yo man, listen man, I'm going through something' and their bredrin might be like '**man toughen up man, stop crying, it's not that deep man, just bitching**' you feel me? You can't go to your friend and be like 'brudda man I'm going through suttim kinda mad' they'll just be like '[kisses teeth] listen man stop crying, toughen up man, stop moving like a *punk*' like or a bitch, do you know what I mean? You just laugh like haha, **then you just go home and it's like-it's like who you gonna go to?** That's why a lot of people kinda, that's why I know a lot of men confide in women and that, they just doing all that.
- Yusef: 'Cause they're hurting?
- Stephen: Yeah 'cause they're hurting and they think the woman's gonna help it to heal but it's not even *that* man. *It's just you understanding what's going on, it's just you understanding yourself.*

Stephen is able to articulate here the agony of living behind the façade of impenetrable masculinity in the everyday. The sources of anguish are many: coping with stigmatisation and being stereotyped, managing social expectations, feeling weak or inadequate, lonely and unloved. Again, a gendered dimension emerges, in the form of care and the feminine capacity to heal.

These feelings are exacerbated by stereotypical depictions of the 'road man' via social media memes and videos, suggesting that a road man is stupid, savage and inherently violent – a connection to historical racialised stereotypes is noticeable (Nichols, 2016). Indeed, stigma should be regarded as a central social process in stimulating the mumpain as a deeply embedded and shifting form of structure that often serves to legitimise and support the status quo (Tyler & Slater, 2018). Because of these historically routed forms of stigma young men on road feel they have to present an exterior self to meet not only the expectation of the collective other in the abstract sense but to deal with physical threats to their being at the local level (Anderson, 1999). There is also the constant expectation of masculine performativity perpetuated in the intimate sphere. Combined with this is a feeling of existential insecurity whereby hidden injuries (Sennett & Cobb, 1988) to the self are left to bleed out. Stephen describes how when someone is alone with themselves, the performance is over and people are left with their suffering; feelings of inadequacy and self-remorse quietly come to the fore. Certainly, this is reflected in Henry Giroux's (2013) account of the 'war on youth' taking place in the USA and elsewhere in the west:

Though poor minority youth may garner some sympathy when their needless deaths receive public attention, too many of them experience and existential and social death every day that often goes unnoticed. (p. 94)

Whilst young men like T & Stephen can offer highly nuanced accounts of the forces applying pressure to their lives, these are largely ignored in wider public discourse and policy. These forms of masculine performativity are connected to essentialised and ahistorical features of certain Othered sections of the population. Stuart Hall's work on representation, particularly relating to his interpretation of Fanon, offers a pertinent account of the power dynamics that limit and 'deform' identity formation, as we see in the extract below:

The ways we have been positioned as subjected in the dominant regimes of representation were a critical exercise of cultural power and normalization ... they had the power to make us see and experience ourselves as 'Other' ... to subject them to that 'knowledge', not only as a matter of ... domination, [but] by the power of inner compulsion and subjective conformation. ... The expropriation of cultural identity cripples and deforms. If its silences are not resisted they produce, in Fanon's vivid phrase, 'individuals without an anchor, without horizon, colourless, stateless, rootless – a race of angels'. (Hall, 1989, p. 70)

In many respects, those interviewed in this study embody the characteristics of Fanon's 'race of angels'. While diverse in their ethnic backgrounds and trajectories there are elements of uncertainty in their identities. Essentialised personhoods can be imposed and claimed to secure feelings of comfort, continuity, desire and belonging. One only must look a little more deeply into Stephen's story to understand this. Below is his response when asked how he got involved with road life:

- Stephen: Naah I didn't, I was confused still, I was proper lost, I didn't know what I wanted to do, I just, going with the flow.
- Yusef: And what happened? What's the story there, what happened next?
- Stephen: I just got involved in dumb kinda gang stuff init, like silly gang nonsense.
- Yusef: What kind of stuff?
- Stephen: [yawns] like staying after school for fights, going home and changing clothes, going to the area-next areas to do all the nonsense, just getting involved in dumb stuff man. Like gang, the whole gang stuff init. This time-this is when I proper started getting disconnected with school as well, like I didn't care about school. The only reason I used to go school was just to keep my mum happy, so she didn't get no phone calls to say yeah, your son weren't in school today ...

Part of Stephen's trajectory that led him into the criminal elements of road life was the increasing threat of physical violence in his neighbourhood. The school's inability to understand the immediate threats to his personal safety as well as the extent to which he was involved in local territorial conflict made accessing intuitional means to progression unsafe for him. Elsewhere in his interview, he questions the legitimacy of the curriculum, deeming it not meaningful in his life:

Stephen: I was disinterested as well, like I felt when I used to go school-like English all these things, like *I don't need these things*, like these thing ain't gonna, teach me what's going on, 'cause *then* stuff started kinda getting real and I started understanding what was going on, so I

used to think, maybe maths, maths would help me, but all this stuff like English, I was like *I don't need to know this* 'cause this isn't gonna help me, get through, erm my man up the street that every time I come back from school he's trying to take my phone ...

In this way, the roads are a cultural resource, a hybrid culture where youth perspectives take centre stage. This resonates with Willis's (1977) concept of *differentiation*: a process whereby the axis upon which the exchanges within educational institutions becomes dislodged, due to the lack of possibility for future exchange as well as the absence of innate value in the knowledge being transmitted. In this case, an annihilation of the future takes place with the irrelevance of the curriculum meaning young people often look elsewhere for value and meaningful notions of selfhood. In the language of Berlant (2011), their optimism is 'cruel' precisely because it exists at odds with the material conditions to realise their desires and ambitions.

Living and coping with the munpain gives rise to a kind of awareness that something might be wrong, but it often falls outside of the known, making it a kind of unspecified 'malaise' (Mills, 1959/2000). A messy amalgamation of structural inequalities and contradictions operate continuously in their lives, working to devalue these young people and inhibit the development of meaningful selfhoods. This leaves them in a condition of everyday anguish: leaving no other option but to find ways of coping with the pain – ways of finding a way to lead a liveable life (Butler, 2010). In the cases of Stephen and T, there was a sense that these everyday experiences of pain and malaise had acted as a causal factor in their involvement in street violence. In neoliberal societies violence has value and for many on road: it 'has become the normal condition of their lives, the only space where ... [they] ... can even recognize how their agency might be defined and what their future has to offer them' (Giroux, 2013, p. 100). If we wish to meaningfully intervene in issues of youth violence, we must take these experiences seriously and look to make changes that can ease young people's munpain.

## Conclusion: Dying to live

In this article, I have outlined the concept of the munpain, explaining its relevance for understanding violent crime amongst young people in the UK's inner cities. I have shown how attending to the rich and insightful accounts of people like T and Stephen can enable us to understand that young people's experience of violence is not senseless. The tensions that characterise the everyday struggles of this 'race of angels' bear the weight of historical and structural injustice. In this context the munpain represents the material and existential realities that signify actual and possible fates worse than death. Many marginalised young people struggle against their feelings of the munpain as they search for liveable lives (Butler, 2010). They are seduced by the possibilities offered by contemporary projects of the self (Young, 2007) but struggle to find the material bases to actualise these aspirational selfhoods, exposing them to the cruel optimism of neoliberal individualism. Another way to understand youth violence is through the eyes of a generation of marginalised young people who are *dying to live*, laying it all on the line in their struggle for meaningful lives. In a world saturated with contradictions and cruel promises, death could be a destination beyond the munpain in the same way violence can be a tool for transcending it.

Perhaps our best hope lies in understanding, as Stephen reminded us earlier: ‘*It’s just you understanding what’s going on.*’ This is a task of re-memembering (Bryan, 2010) as it requires honest and critical work to decipher and piece together the latent and emergent structural inequalities and forms of violence that underpin our status quo. Only once we understand how these are active in our everyday lives can we hope to dismantle them, working to reduce and eradicate the mumpain from young people’s lives.

## Funding

This article originated from a study conducted as part of an ESRC Doctoral Studentship.

## References

- Ahmed, S. (2013). *The cultural politics of emotion*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Anderson, E. (1999). *Code of the street*. New York, NY: Norton.
- Atkinson, A. B. (2015). *Inequality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bakkali, Y. (2018). *Life on road: Symbolic struggle and the mumpain* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Sussex Depository, UK.
- Berlant, L. G. (2011). *Cruel optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Blumer, H. (1954). What is wrong with social theory? *American Sociological Review*, 19, 3–10.
- Bowen, G. A. (2006). Grounded theory and sensitizing concepts. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 5, 12–23.
- Bryan, B. (2010). From Boston to Brixton: An autoethnographic account of schooling from Jamaica to the UK. *Changing English*, 17, 141–152.
- Butler, J. (2010). *Frames of war: When is life grievable?* London, UK: Verso Books.
- Case, S. (2006). Young people ‘at risk’ of what? Challenging risk-focused early intervention as crime prevention. *Youth Justice*, 6, 171–179.
- Cohen, S. (2002). *Folk devils and moral panics: The creation of the mods and rockers*. Hove, UK: Psychology Press.
- Corbin, J. M., & Strauss, A. (1990). Grounded theory research: Procedures, canons, and evaluative criteria. *Qualitative Sociology*, 13, 3–21.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 140, 139–167.
- Duncan-Smith, I. (2007). *Breakthrough Britain: Ending the costs of social breakdown*. London, UK: Centre for Social Justice.
- Fanon, F. (1952). *Black skin, white masks*. New York, NY: Grove.
- Fitzpatrick, K. (1993). Exposure to violence and presence of depression among low-income, African-American youth. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 61, 528–531.
- Fromm, E. (2002). *The sane society*. London, UK: Routledge (Original work published 1956).
- Galtung, J. (1969). Violence, peace, and peace research. *Journal of Peace Research*, 6, 167–191.
- Gilroy, P. (1993). *The black Atlantic: Modernity and double consciousness*. London, UK: Verso.
- Giroux, H. A. (2013). *America’s education deficit and the war on youth: Reform beyond electoral politics*. New York: NYU Press.
- Glynn, M. (2014). *Black men, invisibility, and desistance from crime: Towards a critical race theory from crime*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Gunter, A. (2008). Growing up bad: Black youth, ‘road’ culture and badness in an East London neighbourhood. *Crime, Media, Culture*, 4, 349–366.
- Gunter, A. (2010). *Growing up bad? Black youth, ‘road’ culture and badness in an East London neighbourhood*. London, UK: Tufnell Press.

- Gunter, A., & Watt, P. (2009). Grafting, going to college and working on road: Youth transitions and cultures in an East London neighbourhood. *Journal of Youth Studies*, *12*, 515–529.
- Hall, S. (1989). Cultural identity and cinematic representation. *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, *36*, 68–81.
- Hall, S. (2002). Daubing the drudges of fury: Men, violence and the piety of the ‘hegemonic masculinity’ thesis. *Theoretical Criminology*, *6*, 35–61.
- Hall, S., Massey, D., & Rustin, M. (2013). After neoliberalism: Analysing the present. *Soundings*, *53*, 8–22.
- Hallsworth, S. (2013). *The gang and beyond: Interpreting violent street worlds*. Heidelberg, Germany: Springer.
- Hallsworth, S., & Silverstone, D. (2009). ‘That’s life innit’: A British perspective on guns, crime and social order. *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, *9*, 359–377.
- Hancock, L., & Mooney, G. (2013). ‘Welfare ghettos’ and the ‘broken society’: Territorial stigmatization in the contemporary UK. *Housing, Theory and Society*, *30*, 46–64.
- Harvey, D. (2007a). *Neoliberalism: A brief history*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Harvey, D. (2007b). Neoliberalism as creative destruction. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *610*, 21–44.
- Heyl, B. S. (2001). Ethnographic interviewing. In P. Atkinson, A. Coffey, S. Delamont, J. Lofland, & L. Lofland (Eds.), *Handbook of ethnography* (pp. 369–383). London, UK: Sage.
- Hodkinson, P. (2005). ‘Insider research’ in the study of youth cultures. *Journal of Youth Studies*, *8*, 131–149.
- hooks, b. (1992). *Black looks: Race and representation*. Boston, MA: South East Press.
- Ilan, J. (2015). *Understanding street culture: Poverty, crime, youth and cool*. Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan.
- Labonté, R., & Stuckler, D. (2016). The rise of neoliberalism: How bad economics imperils health and what to do about it. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, *70*, 312–318.
- Lewis, G. (2009). Birthing racial difference: Conversations with my mother and others. *Studies in the Maternal*, *1*, 1–21.
- Littler, J. (2013). Meritocracy as plutocracy: The marketising of ‘Equality’ under neoliberalism. *New Formations*, *80*, 52–72.
- MacRae, R. (2007). ‘Insider’ and ‘outsider’ issues in youth research. *Youth Cultures: Scenes, Subcultures and Tribes*, *10*, 51–62.
- Mignolo, W. (2011). *The darker side of western modernity: Global futures, decolonial options*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Mills, C. W. (2000). *The sociological imagination*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press (Original work published 1959).
- Murray, C. (1984). *Losing ground*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.
- Nichols, B. (2016). Mexicans be like. *Working Papers in Educational Linguistics (WPEL)*, *31*, 69–86.
- Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. (2010). *OECD Factbook*. Paris, France: Author.
- Patton, M. (1990). Purposeful sampling. *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*, *2*, 169–186.
- Peck, J. (2012). Austerity urbanism: American cities under extreme economy. *City*, *16*, 626–655.
- Perera, J. (2018). The politics of Generation Grime. *Race & Class*, *60*, 82–93.
- Piketty, T. (2014). *Capital in the twenty-first century* (A. Goldhammer, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Reay, D. (2005). Beyond consciousness? The psychic landscape of social class. *Sociology*, *39*, 911–928.

- Reay, D. (2013). Social mobility, a panacea for austere times: Tales of emperors, frogs, and tadpoles. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 34, 660–677.
- Reay, D. (2017). *Miseducation: Inequality, education and the working classes*. Bristol, UK: Policy Press.
- Schrecker, T., & Bamba, C. (2015). *How politics makes us sick: Neoliberal epidemics*. Heidelberg, Germany: Springer.
- Sennett, R., & Cobb, J. (1972). *The hidden injuries of class*. New York, NY: Vintage.
- Shildrick, T. (2018). Lessons from Grenfell: Poverty propaganda, stigma and class power. *The Sociological Review*, 66, 783–798.
- Slater, T. (2014). The myth of ‘Broken Britain’: Welfare reform and the production of ignorance. *Antipode*, 46, 948–969.
- Spohrer, K. (2016). Negotiating and contesting ‘success’: Discourses of aspiration in a UK secondary school. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 37, 411–425.
- Stone, N. (2018). The knife crime problem: Further developments. *Youth Justice*, 18, 188–196.
- Taylor, J. (2011). The intimate insider: Negotiating the ethics of friendship when doing insider research. *Qualitative Research*, 11, 3–22.
- Tyler, I. (2013). *Revolt subjects: Social abjection and resistance in neoliberal Britain*. London, UK: Zed Books.
- Tyler, I., & Slater, T. (2018). Rethinking the sociology of stigma. *The Sociological Review*, 66, 721–743.
- Wacquant, L. (2009). *Punishing the poor*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Wilkinson, R., & Pickett, K. (2010). *The spirit level: Why equality is better for everyone*. London, UK: Penguin.
- Wilkinson, R., & Pickett, K. (2018). *The inner level: How more equal societies reduce stress, restore sanity and improve everyone’s well-being*. London, UK: Penguin.
- Willis, P. (1977). *Learning to labor: How working class kids get working class jobs*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Young, J. (2007). *The vertigo of late modernity*. London, UK: Sage.