

**Byron Vincent**  
Poet, writer and performer

## **Nature, nurture and society**

### **Summary**

In this seminar, using a unique blend of carefully crafted language and humour, the writer and performer Byron Vincent talks about his experiences growing up on a council estate and how environment often shapes behaviour. He also explores living with a dual diagnosis of bipolar disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder, his own experiences within the mental health system and possible changes that could be made for the better.

### **Part 1: Growing up on a “sink estate”**

Byron started by sharing a piece he had written for BBC Radio 4. This focused on growing up on a big council estate and the effects this had on shaping his behaviour. Byron took us on a humorous but profound journey through his childhood and adolescence. We were introduced to a gentle soul who at seven years old had ambitions to be a professor of palaeontology and got nightmares after watching the news. A child whose dress sense consisted of *New Romantic* hand-me-downs from his sister and a pair of cowboy boots that were a gift from his absent father. A child at odds with the gruffness of the estate: *“a perpetual tension ran through the sinews of the place and ended up as a knot in my stomach”*.

Byron talked about his experiences of education where he was dismissed by the careers officer, placed in remedial classes for everything and was considered stupid, although he didn't feel stupid. He then talked of drifting in to drug use, homelessness and addiction. Around it all was the familiarity and dominance of a culture of violence and criminality. A culture in which he watched almost all of his peers grow up to engage in sustained criminal activity.

This led to some ethical questions. Byron suggested that either we believe that people born into Britain's disaffected underclass are born with criminal proclivity or we accept that criminal behaviour is a direct consequence of environmental factors. Does this mean that as a society we are criminalising the poor? Those with power are reprimanding those with no power for crimes they themselves would be committing if they were born to a different household? Is this a fair and functioning society or one that is pretty abhorrent?

But what about personal responsibility? Through another personal story of being stabbed but not reporting it to the police, Byron suggested that what we have are two cultures operating under different rules and different expectations. He is not advocating this behaviour but he adhered to it because it is what society, *his society*, expected from him. He described the moment when as a teenager following several experiences of aggression and violence he took a conscious and calculated decision to behave more aggressively: *“I remember the feeling, I remember the thought... ‘if I am going to survive I need to change’. I can hear the detractors now... but the way I saw it I could either go back to sleeping in a bus station or toughen up. It’s a choice between sleeping on the streets or being savaged by raptor-eyed sociopaths. It’s not much of a choice is it? In the same situation I wonder if you are sure you know what you’d do?”* Byron suggested that sometimes those who live on the fringes of society make decisions that are outside the law or mainstream understanding because it is safer for them to do so. No matter what our personality type or ethical foundation, circumstance and environment shape who we are.

Byron finished this section of his talk by suggesting that the *ghettoisation* of people with social and fiscal problems into housing estates designed to keep poor people out of sight and mind is not only distasteful but is destined to create a culture of spiralling social problems that affect us all. Intertwined with the exaggerated form of this ‘survival of the fittest’ culture which exists in prisons he described the two cultures as evolving in unison. In his view nothing actually helpful is being done to deal with the problem of growing criminality in Britain’s underclass. He is baffled how those in power expect those at the bottom of the economic and social ladder to behave responsibly when they, as architects of these issues, take no responsibility for their part. He ended with a request that the next time we walk through a dodgy estate and if we worry about being robbed or worse that we extend this concern to those who live there. He asked us to consider this when we vote, as in the words of American social critic James A Baldwin “the most dangerous creation of any society is a man who has nothing to lose”. We live in a society. Rationally and empathically engaging with those that society has failed isn’t just some liberal-minded obligation, it is a measure of who we are and it is common sense.

## Part 2: Living with a dual diagnosis

In the second part of his talk Byron focused on his experience of living with a dual diagnosis of bipolar disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder. Again he approached this with humour, poetry, honesty and self-awareness. He described his childhood and initial encounters with a psychiatrist, his more recent experiences as an inpatient in an NHS mental health hospital and his ongoing work to cope with his fluctuating moods and behaviour. He talked about relationships with his family, fellow patients and clinical staff. He talked frankly about suicide and musings on medication and its side effects. He ended by reading a statement about his feelings around care:

*“Am I even crazy? I don’t know what that is. I know I get psychotic in the eyes of medicine, in the eyes of science. I know that I have to take a lot of medication. What are any of us if not a hot mess of consciousness imprisoned in flesh and time? What is perception, if not a self-constructed hallucination? What are ideas if not the delusions of our exclusive experiences? The illusion of the self is a cage; it confines us to our insular desires. Compassion and empathy are the keys to that cage, invite people in and allow yourself to be invited... Shakespeare wrote ‘love is merely a madness and I tell you deserves as well a dark house and to be whipped as mad men do’. I was right there with him up until he said madmen deserve to be whipped in a dark house and that not so much. I guess that is the point for all these little stories that, as a crazy person, somebody who is clinically insane, I don’t expect to be loved or understood even. Just at the very least don’t stick me in a dark house and whip me either literally or metaphorically.”*

## Part 3: Questions and discussion

Following the talk Byron responded openly to a series of wide-ranging questions including: suggestions about how to improve psychiatric care; friendship and relationships; what has helped him to arrive where he is now; young men and suicide; the role of charities and helplines; aggression, violence and compassion; sources of hope; inequalities in society; sanity in a crazy world; and ‘Mad Pride’. This summary cannot do justice to Byron’s presentation or the rich variety of topics covered by the Q&A session – we would strongly encourage you to watch the video or listen to the audio recording of the event which present the discussions in more detail.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the speaker and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Glasgow Centre for Population Health.

Summary prepared by the Glasgow Centre for Population Health.