The slow rise of #MeToo sexual panic
A Voice for Men | 9 January, 2020 | by Gerald Schoenewolf, Ph.D.

The current hysteria surrounding sexual abuse of women, otherwise known as the #MeToo movement, has been a long time in the making. Fantasies of a ‘rape culture’ were first generated within radical feminist circles in the 1970s, who pressed the idea relentlessly into the imaginations of a wider public. Its zealous promotion led to an increased culture of ‘belief,’ and the fateful commandment listen and believe. As with all mass hysterical movements that went before it, such as false memory syndrome of the 1990s, or the Salem Witch Trials, there were people who predicted its rise.

As a matter of historical interest, one of those documenting the rise of the current hysteria was Dr. Gerald Schoenewolf, when in 1991 he delivered a talk titled The Feminist Myth About Sexual Abuse to the Psychohistory Association. When delivering the paper he decided not to take questions after the presentation. Some feminists in the audience, who had only attended the talk to knock the piece down, began yelling their displeasure and treating him like it was sexist to read a presentation and not allow a question and answer or discussion period. Later, during a closing meeting, one of the women jumped up stage and made a shrill objection to the presentation, citing again that the speaker didn’t allow a question and answer period, and painting him as a sexist-extraordinaire. The leader of proceedings backed down and allowed her to express her anger for about 20 minutes.

As readers will be aware, that’s how it was in those days. The 1990s and early 2000s were a more repressive time when nobody was allowed to express criticism of any aspect of feminism without being demonized and punished, and in that environment the subsequent transcript of Dr. Schoenewolf’s paper quickly faded from public circulation – that is until now. Below is an excerpt of the paper discussing the rise of feminist inspired sexual abuse hysteria within feminism, psychoanalysis and the wider culture. – Eds.

The feminist myth about sexual abuse

Whenever one hears the term “sexual abuse” these days – and one hears it fairly often – it is generally meant to mean male sexual abuse of women and children. One comes across references to sexual abuse in newspapers, on television, in public service advertisements, and in various other places, nearly all of which point the finger at men and foster the impression that men cannot be trusted, that make sexuality is something menacing, something dirty, something that must be controlled.

This current attitude toward sexual abuse seems to have emerged out of the feminist movement. It was expressed most succinctly in Brownmiller’s (1975) introduction to her popular book on rape, Against Our Will:

Men’s discovery that his genitalia would serve as a weapon to generate fear must rank as one of the most important discoveries of prehistoric times, along with the use of fire and the first crude stone axe. From prehistoric times to the present, I believe rape has played a critical function. It is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear. [p.5, italics are Brownmiller’s]

Upon analytic inspection, this statement would seem to be a manifestation of female hysteria (“all men keep all women in a state of fear”), as well as castration complex (“Men’s discovery that his genitalia would serve as a weapon….”). Indeed, the “state of fear” of which Brownmiller speaks might be seen as
an ontogenetic reference to the infantile discovery of the difference in sexual anatomy. When a little girl first discovers a penis, it probably is a frightening event, due to the talion principle; the immediate desire to pull it off and take it for herself arouses the counterfear that the male will penetrate and destroy her with his penis. Nevertheless, Brownmiller’s statement, and similar ones by others, have become keynotes of the feminist movement, and the notion that most men use sexuality to oppress women has become an accepted fact in popular culture.

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THE POLITICS OF SEXUAL ABUSE

Until recently, psychoanalytic writing on incest or sexual abuse was low-keyed and gender-neutral. Describing the Wolf Man’s first incestuous experience with his older sister, Freud (1918) sounds more like a novelist than a psychologist: “It was in spring, at a time when his father was away; the children were in one room playing on the floor, while their mother was working in the next. His sister had taken hold of his member and played with it, at the same time telling him incomprehensible stories about his Nanya, as though by way of explanation” (p. 487). Freud did not use the terms “incest” or “sexual abuse,” but rather called this incident a “seduction” and left it at that. Whether it was a seduction by a male or female, father or mother, it was simply something to understand and explain. By the time he wrote his case, he had long abandoned the seduction theory, yet he viewed the Wolf Man’s seduction (which he was convinced was a real seduction and not a fantasy) as a chief cause of the Wolf Man’s later fear of women and perverse tendencies, although not the root cause of his pathology.

Ferenczi (1933) was the first psychoanalyst to question Freud’s abandonment of the seduction theory. However, his focus on sexual trauma, like Freud’s, was gender-neutral: “The rape of girls who have grown out of the age of infants, the similar sexual acts of mature women with boys, and also enforced homosexual acts, are more frequent occurrences than has hitherto been assumed” (p. 162). Ferenczi focused on all aspects of the problem, not just male-female abuse. He understood that it could just as often be female-male, or female-female, or male-male abuse. He also stressed that victims of sexual abuse often precipitate their molestation, pointing out that children are naturally seductive and curious about sex, as well as desirous of winning parental approval. He did not mean by this, as feminists have interpreted, that children are to blame for their abuse.

Shengold (1979) used the term, “soul murder,” to describe the long-term sexual or physical abuse (or deprivation) characterised by “man’s inhumanity to man,” wherein one uses his power over another to “crush his individuality, his dignity, his capacity to feel deeply” (p. 536). Although this term has a derogatory meaning, Shengold, like Freud and Ferenczi, was gender-neutral, designating both mothers and fathers as soul murderers.

With the advent of feminism, an angry, gender-biased tone crept into discussions of sexual abuse and other aspects of male-female relations. It was heard most strongly among radical feminists. “Are men who rape their daughters a subspecies of brute monster?” Brownmiller asks (p. 311), asserting that the meaning of child sexual abuse is linked to the patriarchal philosophy of “sexual private property.”

This feminist penchant for viewing sexuality in terms of male abuse of females sometimes reaches a point of absurdity, as when a feminist reviewer in the New York Times (Heilbrun, 1990) recently reinterpreted Shakespeare’s Richard III as a tale about a male abuser of women getting what was coming to him. She saw all men in the play as obsessed by “raw masculine ambition,” “extreme machismo,” and “male rampage,” while the female characters were full of “feminine wisdom and gentleness.” She accused Richard of feeling “threatened by women,” and therefore blaming them for the world’s wrongs, and of regarding them as the “representation of evil,” and she asserted that “his behaviour rests on contempt for women,” and that he requires that they be abused and suppressed. In truth, Richard was contemptuous of
both men and women, and his contempt stemmed not from bias but from deep-rooted characterological rage.

She concluded that the play was about manhood, and sought to prove that Shakespeare was in reality a feminist who was condemning a society in which extreme machismo was raised to an ideal, comparing Richard to the popular macho film actor, Arnold Schwarzenegger. But Richard operated by guile, not by machismo, and society did not idealise him so much as abhor him. She sees all the characters in this play as sexual stereotypes who are espousing a political position, rather than as complex individual men and women.

Feminists have often distorted male-female sexuality with this kind of ideological thinking. Such ideas, when they come from the mouths of female patients, appear to be the narcissistic projective identifications typical of women with multiple pregenital fixations, particularly those who have not resolved the narcissistic blow of lacking a particularly visible organ and who defend against the consequent feelings of inferiority by splitting and projecting. Full of hate and resentment against men, such women need to justify this hatred by finding as much fault and hatred and bias in men as possible. One finds the same process at work in the treatment of many patients, such as borderlines, who habitually split off and projectively identify the psychoanalyst as being a liar, cheat, bigot, letch, murderer, when in fact it is they who harbor these personalities inside them.

To understand how the feminist myth about sexual abuse developed, as well as how it affects society, it is necessary to analyse the wellsprings of feminism. I have written elsewhere (Schoenewolf, 1989) that from a psychodynamic standpoint feminism represents a collective acting out of female narcissism in the societal arena, a rebellion against the primal father. One can discern in the movement rhetoric both a conscious and an unconscious (or preconscious) component. Consciously, feminists proclaim themselves to be fighting for female equality and other seemingly worthwhile causes. Unconsciously, their aim is to vindicate women and castrate (psychologically) men. It is as though they were saying, “Men were given the penises, so now women are going to rule over them.” The theme of “women are innocent and men are guilty” is a direct expression of the female narcissism stemming from such emotional sources as unresolved penis envy.

Collectively, feminism also represents a fixation at the Oedipal stage; the degree of a feminist’s radicalism corresponds to the degree to which she is caught up in the negative oedipal dependence on and erotic pull to the mother (and sisters). There is an identification with the mother-as-victim and with her perspective of the father-as-oppressor by both female and male children which, later in life, is transformed into a crusade to vindicate women and “dethrone” men. The idea is that if they can only make things right for women in general, then mother will be happy, accepting and approving. Another aspect of female narcissism, associated with the fixation in a negative oedipal situation, is a latent or actual orientation and viewpoint, which was alluded to by Siegel (1989) in her study of eight homosexual women. McDougall (1970) also made note of this, and described in detail how the mothers of homosexual women tend to bind their daughters to them and prohibit their normal turn to the father and other men. Commenting on her treatment of one homosexual woman, whose mother would constantly tell her how men raped and were sexually violent with women, she concluded, “The overall impression was that the mother repudiated heterosexual feelings in herself and forbade them to her daughter” (p. 194).

The castigation of men as sexual abusers of women and children is a way of turning women away from men, and of encouraging them to turn to other women. Feminism is often an attempt to maintain the homosexual bond with the mother (which, if dissolved, means loss of mother’s approval and hence self-annihilation) and with other “sisters,” while excluding the father and rendering him passive, as so often
happens in feminist families. The aim is to entice all women away from the envied and hated men (the sexual man) and to lure them into an act or symbolic form of lesbianism. The fact that lesbians can be just as sexually exploitative towards their women sex partners as men, and are just as guilty of date rape (insisting on sex when their partner at first says no), is ignored by feminists. Their focus is solely on the sexual abuses of men, not on sexual abuse.

The hunt for sexual abusers can also be an hysterical phenomenon. Hysteria can bring about individual as well as group emotional contagion. Like all witch hunts, the hunt for sexual abusers is fuelled by a panicky, hysterical fear that feeds on itself. The panic is there because such witch hunts are themselves forms of abuse, generalised accusations hurled at random; deep down, those who hurl such accusations know that they are out of control, and once they start they have to keep upping the ante in order to keep the monster that have created in obeyance. They must keep finding more and more evidence of sexual abuse to justify the feelings of overwhelming rage inside them which they harbor for the male gender and which are not justified by the ordinary events of their daily lives, but are linked to childhood occurrences and fantasies.

This hysteria affects not only women but also men; indeed, it may well affect men even more. Witness the books by male authors, such as those cited in this paper, supporting the feminist anti-male cause. In psychoanalysis there are also many male authors who are quick to champion anti-male feminism, whose critical faculties seem to disappear entirely when they are discussing women’s issues. The rage that is the undercurrent of feminism has a terrifying effect in such men. It’s desperation and stridency, like that of an individual hysteric, seems unstoppable and relentless. In addition, such men, who invariably suffer from the counterpart of female narcissism – male narcissism and a male castration complex – have a fear of WOMAN (Winnicott, 1965), a fear of being lured back into a state of absolute dependency, a fear of the phallic witch-mother of early infancy, the “mother who had absolute power at the beginning of the infant’s existence to provide, or to fail to provide, the essentials for the early establishment of the self as an individual” (p. 164). Women, according to Winnicott, have this fear too, but they can mitigate it somewhat through identification with WOMAN, with the primitive introjected mother within themselves. Men, on the other hand, have historically defended against this fear by bonding together in men’s fraternities and by suppressing women.

Indeed, it would appear that a certain amount of male bonding and a certain amount of freedom in voicing complaints about women is a healthy thing for men and society. Conversely, the feminist attempt to intrude on male bonding and muffle men’s complaints about women is unhealthy for society, for when man cannot freely verbalise critical feelings about women, they will more readily act them out. On an unconscious level this is what the psychopathological feminist wants. She wants men to act out their feelings, wants them to be sexual abusers, in order to have all the more reasons for the rage at the root of her gender narcissism.

The question arises, why did this trend occur now? Why has feminism and its emphasis on male sexual abuse become so predominant in both the popular culture and some aspects of the mental health field at this time in history? Feminism began with the advent of the printing press in the seventeenth century, when women started publishing tracts and letters for other women to read. It became a formal movement in the eighteenth century, when women in England and the United States began asserting women’s rights to equal education, suffrage, and equal opportunity. All of these, of course, were just causes. However, somewhere along the way, the movement became obsessed with putting down men and with matters of male-female sexuality, and the theme of male sexual abuse of women and children took wing. It has now reached a point at which some radical feminists consider any form of intercourse with a man to be an act of rape, and advocate celibacy and lesbianism: “Until we say, ‘I control my own body and I don’t need any insolent make with an overbearing presumptuous prick to come and clean out my pipes’ they will
always have over us the devastating threat of withdrawing their sexual attentions” (Denamore, 1970, p. 267).

This perverse sexual attitude of radical feminism seems to have become more prominent during the current wave of feminism which sprang up in the late 1960s. It may well be an aspect of the permissive upbringing accorded the baby-boom generation following our triumph in World War II. Glorifying in our victory, American parents gave our children everything. This permissiveness spawned the “me generation,” with its constant demands to have its needs instantly gratified, and the sexual revolution, with its anti-family, pro-individual-lifestyle orientation. At first the feminist movement was a part of this general movement towards radical liberalism, but at some point it became a revolt against male sexuality, perhaps in reaction to the sexual revolution of the late Sixties and early Seventies, when women were expected to engage in free love indiscriminately with men.

This growth of narcissism and the revolt against male sexuality merged with the rebellion against male authority that had characterised the feminist movement from the beginning. More and more, any kind of male assertiveness was seen as an aspect of patriarchy, male chauvinism, and sexual abuse. At the same time, female aggressiveness was extolled as an act of liberation. The result was that women became more aggressive and man more passive, which had the effect of giving women increasing power over men in the personal realm as well as in other aspects of society.

Power, as they say, corrupts, and the power that women now have over men has taken the form of the very disparagement of men and male sexuality that feminists say men are guilty of with regard to women. This power has encouraged the acting out of collective hysteria and the castigating of men as sexual abusers. There is no longer a system of checks and balances between the sexes: Men, having retreated into passivity, are afraid to assert themselves against women lest they be viewed as sexists, misogynists, or oppressors. By and large, men are psychologically controlled by women from birth inward, and that control is now so complete that it threatens to create a feminist state with an increasingly perverse value system surrounding male-female sexuality.

The myth that sexual abuse is solely a man-against-woman thing is destructive to society and to the family. It serves to polarise the sexes and create an atmosphere of paranoia and distrust between the sexes, which in turn affects childrearing and the collective character and quality of society. It is part of a general trend by psychopathological feminism that has become increasingly powerful in forming popular cultural values in our era. These popular cultural values (i.e. Women are innocent, men are guilty), when transmitted from parents to children, contribute to a general all-pervasive state of tension and dissatisfaction; for, if an entire gender is constantly under attack and on the defensive, neither gender can be at peace.

Any human being with an immature sexual development may become a sexual abuser – whether man, woman, or child – if in a position to do so. It is important for psychohistorians and mental health professionals to help raise the public’s consciousness of this fact and of the feminist myth about sexual abuse.

References:

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