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NEW MALE STUDIES – AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

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PREFACE

This first issue of New Male Studies - An International Journal for 2018 includes contributions from academics and professionals living in Australia, Canada, India, and the USA who wish to enrich our understanding of maleness.

The articles examine various aspects of sexual politics that impact boys and men. Janice Fiamengo's "Being Male in a Feminist Culture" addresses the question, "What happens to men when their sense of worth and purpose are actively denied and undermined by the culture at large?" Her essay is excerpted from her recently published book, *Sons of Feminism: Men Have Their Say*, to be reviewed in our next issue. In their contributions Miles Groth and Gary Senecal respectively explore supportive responses to distress; the former attending to intimate partner and family violence, the latter to veterans' reintegration into civilian society. Stephen Baskerville's essay contrasts the consequences of two distinct forms of radicalism that "make regulating sexual behavior a high priority."

Paul Nathanson's "A Requiem for Manhood," offers his personal response to the loss of positive cinematic depictions of manhood and the likely destructive impact of on males if we "continue to pathologize or demonize just about every feature of masculinity (or even maleness itself)." Anant Kumar articulates a rationale for establishing a National Commission for Men in India and speculates on some consequences of doing so. Gerard Nicol shares his article, "Feminism: toxic masculinity," and addresses two typical critical responses to it. The issue concludes with a photographic essay by Jan Andersen.



The opinions expressed by the authors herein do not necessarily reflect those of the Editorial Team. Papers offered here are presented in the spirit of open, evidence-based dialogue regarding gender, relationships and issues related to male experience. The Editorial Team thanks the article reviewers for generously contributing their time and their insights.



Dennis Gouws

Editor in Chief

NEW MALE STUDIES: AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL (NMS) IS AN OPEN ACCESS ONLINE INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL FOR RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION OF ISSUES FACING BOYS AND MEN WORLDWIDE.

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THE SEXUAL JIHAD

The Global Rise of Sexual and Religious Radicalism

Stephen K. Baskerville



ABSTRACT

Since 1989, the two most dynamic ideological trends in global politics have been religious radicalism, especially Islamist, and sexual radicalism, both feminist and homosexualist. Both have roots in older socialist/Communist ideologies and likewise reject traditional Western Christian values and promise sweeping social transformation. Both make regulating sexual behavior a high priority. Though mutually incompatible in content, both aspire to political power at the expense of the traditional Christian West and by controlling the terms of sexuality. Occasionally, they also make common cause. Yet political radicalism originated in the West, arguably in English Puritanism, where similarities are seen with today's Islamism, including the latter's "puritanical" sexual morality and the alleged "patriarchal" quality of both movements. Yet not all forms of religious radicalism regulate sexuality in the same way. Puritanism led to stability, freedom, and prosperity. Islamism (so far) has led only to instability, stagnation, and terror. More research is needed into both the theology and the practical politics to explain why.

Keywords: Islamism, feminism, puritanism, religious radicalism, sexual radicalism, family

THE ARGUMENT

Since the collapse of European Communism in 1989-91, two claimants have emerged to inherit the leadership of transnational ideology.¹ Both have roots in the broad socialist-communist ideology that dominated the twentieth century. But since the effective discrediting of that system, these new claimants have, between them, dramatically altered the ideological polarity of global politics on a scale comparable to what socialism achieved in its day. Yet where socialism based its grievances on social and economic relations, its successor ideologies derive their complaints from relations of sexuality.

Over the last four decades, the global political agenda has increasingly come to be dominated by the politics of sex.² The most obvious driver is feminism along with a recently assertive homosexual politics. Its less obvious rival is no less determined to ground its claims to power on control of sexuality: radical Islamism. These two ideological systems are usually seen as antagonists, with programs and agendas whose theoretical incompatibility needs no description. Yet they might more instructively be seen as rivals. For all their obvious differences, they share an aspiration to political power based on their claims to control and change the terms of sexual relations, along with connected issues such as the family and children.

Moreover, both have a common opponent (though also some common historical roots) in a third model that has also based its claims to legitimacy, in part, on its ability to manage the terms of sexuality, children, and the family. This is the traditionally Christian West and the increasingly Christian South³.

¹ For comments and suggestions on earlier versions, the author would like to thank Katherine Gorka, Frans Veerman, and the members of the following conferences: Religion and Politics in the Globalization Era, Centre for Political Analysis, Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, 22-24 June 2012; Second International Congress on Science, Ethics, and Integrated Education, Sao Paulo, 6-8 December 2012; International Consultation on Religious Freedom Research, International Institute for Religious Freedom, Istanbul, 16-18 March 2013; Conference of the Association for the Study of Religion, Economics, and Culture (ASREC), Washington, 11-14 April 2013.

² Newsweek magazine cover: <http://www.rojaksite.com/newsweek-politics-of-sex/>.

³ Christian global South (formally known as the Third World).

These three models offer today's dominant choices for ordering the relations between men and women, marriage, family structure, and children. And each carries profound and very different implications for both the secular domestic political order and the alignment of global politics.

THE NEW SEXUAL MILITANCY

The obvious pioneers of sexual politics are the feminists and their recent allies in the homosexual rights movement. The Sexual "Revolution" has now moved far beyond feminist claims to equal rights or homosexual demands to be left alone and now encompasses a vast array of demands that have already achieved far-reaching changes in Western societies and beyond: including the terms of marriage, the family, demography, the economy, international relations, and the very nature and purpose of civil government.

What some call "sexualityism"⁴ or "gender ideology," and what one sympathetic scholar terms "the ideology of the erotic,"⁵ has now positioned itself on the vanguard of left-wing politics." There is much more to the new sexual politics than sexual freedom. Demands for "power" and "empowerment" indicate that what has evolved is a true and complete ideology involving extensive political aspirations. It replaces the old socialistic battle cry of "social justice" with demands for what is now being called "erotic justice."⁶ Richard Parker explains how effectively this new ideology operates to overturn social and political hierarchies, offend traditional sensibilities, and promote rebellion as a virtue for its own sake:

The erotic...is linked to the structures of power...The relationship between power and eroticism can only be understood...by situating the erotic...as a kind of alternative to these other systems...the erotic offers an anarchic alternative to the established order of the sexual universe: an alternative in which the only absolute rule is the transgression of prohibitions...Transgressing the established order of daily life...even the structures of

⁴ Helen Alvare, "The White House and Sexualityism," *Public Discourse*, 16 July 2012, <http://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2012/07/5757/>.

⁵ Richard Parker, *Bodies, Pleasures, and Passions: Sexual Culture in Contemporary Brazil* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2009), p. 111.

⁶ Sonia Corrêa, Rosalind Petchesky, and Richard Parker, *Sexuality, Health, and Human Rights* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), pp. 4-5.

power can themselves be eroticized within this frame of reference... No less than same-sex interactions, extramarital affairs, masturbation, or anal intercourse...destroy the hierarchical values of the everyday world...The workings of power must be understood through the cultural forms and meanings of the erotic, and the symbolism of the erotic must be interpreted through the structures of power and its capacity to transform them.⁷

Globally and especially in the democracies, the dominance of sexual ideology is unrivalled at the cutting edge of today's left. Virtually every item on the Western public agenda is now feminized or sexualized and cast in terms of its impact on women or "women and children" or a broader "gender identity": health, welfare, immigration, taxation, the environment, development, military power – all, we are told, require special considerations for women, children, or "sexual minorities." Economic crises are addressed according to their allegedly special impact on women. War and foreign policy are transformed by debates about women and homosexuals in the military and in other societies. The environment is a women's issue, we are told, and so is climate change.⁸

One indicator is the outpouring of triumphalist articles in prestigious journals gloating over the new feminine power: In *Foreign Policy*, Reihan Salam announces "The Death of Macho" and the destruction of "the macho men's club." In "A Woman's World," on the cover of the *Wilson Quarterly*, Sara Sklaroff proclaims that "women are taking over." In "The End of Men" on the *Atlantic Monthly* cover, Hanna Rosin describes "how women are taking control of everything." Revealingly, none of these authors or journals apparently feels any need to justify this trend, approach it with any measure of critical or skeptical detachment, or entertain even the possibility that it may entail any negative features or injustices of its own.

Domestically, the dominance of sexual ideology over left-wing politics is seen in the sexualisation of the welfare state. Originally justified on quasi-socialistic principles as a measure to alleviate working class poverty and insecurity, continued welfare expansion today is justified instead mostly on feminist principles, citing the "feminization of poverty" and the poverty

⁷ Parker, Bodies, Pleasures, and Passions, 151-152.

⁸ Stephen Baskerville, *The New Politics of Sex: The Sexual Revolution, Civil Liberties, and the Growth of Governmental Power* (Kettering, Ohio: Angelico Press, 2017).

specifically of children. Welfare officials themselves are overwhelmingly women, and the combination of dispensers and recipients constitutes a formidable political pressure group. This in fact was the core constituency of former American President Barack Obama, presidential aspirant Hillary Clinton, former French President Francois Hollande, and other left-leaning governments, such governments in Spain, Brazil, and Chile. Even as its costs strain government budgets and topple prime ministers, welfare spending continues to increase, with angry protesters (mostly female and adolescent) in Athens, London, Manchester, and elsewhere striking fear into any politician who contemplates substantial spending reductions.

In the United States, welfarist ideology was expanded to government healthcare, and the sexual left became its principal lobby.⁹ Its formidable power extends to coercive measures involving both finances and religion – significantly over matters like abortion and contraception that have less to do with health than with sexuality. Under Obamacare, for the first time, American citizens were required to buy someone’s product as a condition for living in their own country and overriding their religious or political convictions.

This points to another consequence of sexual ideology: the impact on religious liberty. Virtually every controversy involving religious freedom in the West now proceeds from demands for sexual freedom:¹⁰ preachers are arrested for criticizing homosexuality; town clerks and registrars have been fired and even arrested for refusing to officiate same-sex marriages; bed-and-breakfast owners are sued for refusing to accommodate cohabiting homosexuals; Catholic adoption agencies have been closed for refusing to place children with same-sex couples; Christian firemen are required to participate in political demonstrations that mock their religion and police to display political symbols in police stations; homeschoolers have lost their children to school authorities implementing an increasingly sexualized curriculum;¹¹ proposed European

⁹ *Unmarried Women On Health Care: Unmarried Women Driving Change on Leading Domestic Issue*, Greenberg Quinlan Rosner internet site:

http://www.greenbergresearch.com/articles/2066/3853_wvvv%20_health%20care%20memo_%200807m9_FL_NAL_.pdf, 8 August 2007.

¹⁰ Stephen Baskerville, “The Sexual Agenda and Religious Freedom,” *International Journal for Religious Freedom*, vol. 4, no. 2 (2011).

¹¹ Mike Donnelly, “Religious Freedom in Education,” *International Journal for Religious Freedom*, vol. 4, no. 2 (2011).

Union directives would allow private citizens to be sued for expressing beliefs about sexual issues.¹²

Sexual politics has fundamentally transformed the very nature and purpose of civil government. The most basic state functions – external defense, border security, and criminal justice – have been altered, with governments relinquishing their traditional functions and increasingly acquiring new ones: care of children and the aged, education, medical care. It is tempting to point out that the traditional functions being surrendered by the state are masculine, whereas the new government roles are traditionally feminine. Here as elsewhere, gender roles are not eliminated but politicized. The face of the modern state is less the male soldier or policeman and more the female social worker and civil servant. And yet critically, the new feminized functionaries are no less police than were the previous male ones. They simply do not wear uniforms, and they are not restrained as were traditional police from the power to exercise coercive jurisdiction over the private lives of non-criminal citizens.

Correspondingly, the basic internal state function – criminal justice – has also been dramatically redefined. On the one hand, the criminal justice system has long been changing in ways that are seen as more humane and “caring,” with lighter sentences, alternatives to incarceration, and special procedures for youth and others deemed not fully responsible for their actions. Yet alongside this apparent humanization of criminal justice and hardly noticed, have emerged new sexual crimes defined by the new sexual gendarmerie.

Since the inception of their revolution sexual militants have been creating a vast panoply of new crimes and expanded redefinitions of existing crimes – all involving sexuality: “rape” (substantially redefined), “sexual assault,” “sexual harassment,” “domestic violence,” “stalking,” “bullying,” “child abuse,” “sex trafficking,” and more. These new crimes often bear little resemblance to what is suggested by the terminology. Yet they have politicized law enforcement and criminal justice, rendered both criminal and civil law vague and subjective, by-passed and eroded due process protections, and criminalized and incarcerated large numbers of men and

¹² Paul Coleman and Roger Kiska, “The Proposed EU ‘Equal Treatment’ Directive,” *International Journal for Religious Freedom*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2012).

some women who had no knowledge that they were committing a crime.¹³ Recent accusations of various and ill-defined forms of sexual “misconduct” against major figures in the culture and politics are only the latest and most visible manifestations, elevated to media prominence, of a trend that has been widespread for years beneath the media radar screen and where the targets have overwhelmingly been private individuals.¹⁴

THE SEXUAL JIHAD

This paradoxical combination of sexual freedom and sexual punishment resembles radical ideologies of the past. Though often containing elements of sexual libertinism, successful political ideologies have usually been characterized by a certain sexual puritanism. This is often but not necessarily religious. “Ironically, those countries which rejected religion in the name of Communism tended to adopt their own version of sexual puritanism, which often matched those of the religions they assailed,” Dennis Altman observes.¹⁵ The most effective radical organizers have sought to limit sexual license, and a major achievement of Lenin and Bolshevism was to discipline the cadres’ “infantile” bohemianism by channeling the libido into party activity. “Drown your sexual energy in public work,” urged Nicolai Semashko, the first People’s Commissar for Health. “If you want to solve the sexual problem, be a public worker.”¹⁶ When bohemianism crept back into early Soviet family policy in the form of easy divorce laws, it caused widespread social havoc and had to be abandoned.¹⁷

But communist and other secular ideologies have proven far less effective in repressing sexual license than has radical religion. This may explain why Leninist-Maoist ideologies, that

¹³ Baskerville, *New Politics of Sex*, ch. 3; Marie Gottschalk, *The Prison and the Gallows: The Politics of Mass Incarceration in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 115-116.

¹⁴ Stephen Baskerville, “The Sexual Revolution Turns Ugly,” *Crisis*, 16 November 2017, <http://www.crisismagazine.com/2017/sexual-revolution-turns-ugly>

¹⁵ Dennis Altman, *Global Sex* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 6.

¹⁶ Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 188.

¹⁷ The feminist legislation of the Bolsheviks was extensive, though no more so than what Western governments have enacted today. “This was Western feminism’s maximum program,” writes Eley (*ibid.*). The result was chaos, and the program was repealed. See “The Russian Effort to Abolish Marriage,” by “a woman resident in Russia,” *Atlantic Monthly*, 1 July 1926 (<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1926/07/the-russian-effort-to-abolish-marriage/306295/>).

dominated post-war movements of “national liberation” in the global South have given way to radical Islamism (plus other forms of radical religion such as Hindutva and radicalized Buddhism, as well as a Christian revival).¹⁸ Here too the dominant political motif is sexual.

Sexuality is not peripheral in the agendas of these movements. “The centrality of gender relations in the political ideology of Islam,” in the words of Parvin Paidar, is now widely acknowledged by scholars.¹⁹ Whatever the various resentments fueling Islamist activism, the Islamist response largely distills down into sexual regulation. Radical Muslims understand that controlling sex and claiming sexual purity translate into political power. “The issue of women is not marginal,” write Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit; “it lies at the heart of Islamic [radicalism].”²⁰ The relationship between sexual discipline and civic freedom, at one time well understood in the West (as we shall see), is now largely forgotten in that culture. But Islamists today understand it keenly. “The *hejab* has been identified by the [Iranian] regime as the very cornerstone of its revolution,” notes Haideh Moghissi. “It is described as basic to Islamic ideology and...seen by them as denoting deliverance from the yoke of imperialism ‘and as representing’ a symbol of liberation and resistance to capitalism and of revolutionary aspirations.”²¹

In a popular work, Danesh D’Souza has argued that Muslim fear and hatred of the West proceeds from a perception of Western sexual depravity: “The main focus of Islamic disgust [over Abu Ghraib] was what Muslims perceived as extreme sexual perversion.” In contrast to Western liberal sensibilities, Muslim revulsion over the highly publicized mistreatment of prisoners proceeded not from its brutality but from its debauchery. “What that female American soldier in uniform did to the Arab man, strip him of his manhood and pull him on a leash,” comments one Muslim, “this is what America wants to do to the Muslim world.” Osama bin

¹⁸ Michael Walzer, *The Paradox of Liberation: Secular Revolutions and Religious Counterrevolutions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

¹⁹ Quoted in Masoud Kazemzadeh, *Islamic Fundamentalism, Feminism, and Gender Inequality in Iran Under Khomeini* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2002), p. 4.

²⁰ Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit, *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of Its Enemies* (New York: Penguin, 2004). The online version of this book does not appear to have page numbers.

²¹ Haideh Moghissi, ed., *Women and Islam* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 77-78.

Laden is likewise quoted as saying that “They want to skin us from our manhood.” Wounded “manhood” is a theme in the literature of Hindutva and political Buddhism and one to which we will return.

D’Souza’s suggestion that Western sexual dissipation inflames Muslim hostility and plays into the hands of Islamist radicals cannot be lightly dismissed. “The West is...a society in which the number of illegitimate children approaches and sometimes surpasses the number of children from permitted unions,” declares one radical sheikh, accurately. Such perceptions are hardly hyperbole; they touch on the most acute social crisis in the West today, where the deterioration of marriage and the family and the proliferation of single-parent homes is a major source of social anomie and economic insolvency. “The most basic right of a child is to have two parents, and this right is taken away from nearly half of the children in Western society,” writes one Muslim scholar.²² The Ayatollah Mottahari describes the western welfare state and divorce machinery, likewise with some accuracy:

The replacement of the father by the government, which is the current trend in the West, will...alter the very nature of motherhood from an emotional tie into a form of waged employment with money as an intermediary between mother and her love; motherhood then is no longer a bond, but a paid employment. It is obvious that this process would lead to the destruction of the family.²³

At the same time, Islamism is far from a simple return to family values. D’Souza draws his evidence not from some Islamic version of Focus on the Family but from leading purveyors of Islamist political terror, such as Sayyid Qutb and Osama bin Laden. This suggests that, while perceived Western sexual decadence does indeed fuel support for Islamic terror, Islamists have moved far beyond the passive defense of traditional morality to create a new and fanatical ideology that, far from seeking to preserve the *status quo*, aims to alter it radically.

²² Danesh D’Souza, *The Enemy at Home: The Cultural Left and Its Responsibility for 9/11* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), pp. 150, 152, 153.

²³ Quoted in Abida Samiuddin, “Iranian Women and their Support for Islam,” in *Muslim Feminist and Feminist Movement: Middle East – Asia*, vol. 1, ed. Abida Samiuddin and R. Khanam (Delhi: Global Vision, 2002), p. 312.

The resentments fueling Islamist militancy combine grievances over sexual decadence we traditionally associate with the right with those previously championed by the radical left such as “imperialism” and “capitalism”. The ideology freely borrows from its kindred Western ideologies, revolutionary fascism and Marxism – and indeed, unlikely as it may seem, even feminism. “While steeped in Islamic myth and forms, the events of 1979 represented first and foremost a political revolution,” writes a scholar, referring to Islamism’s most sophisticated political creation so far, in Iran:

Khomeini’s revolutionary role models were secular and, for the most part, Western. During the revolution and since, revolutionary political goals have always taken precedence over religious goals. ... Iranian law contains many non-Islamic concepts: legal (if not yet actual) *equality between the sexes concerning property, employment, and family rights...*²⁴

And the empathy is mutual. Perplexing to many is the affinity the Western left apparently feels with radical Islamism. “It is striking,” notes the late Fred Halliday of the “politically articulated accommodation...between Islamism as a political force and many groups of the left.”²⁵ Strikingly, even feminism manages to make its peace with radical Islam.²⁶

Indeed, the central paradox to be explained is why, if Islamism oppresses women, does it attract such large numbers of them. “Many observers have wondered why women in the hundreds of thousands, including educated women, actively supported a movement which appeared to curtail their rights.”²⁷ That they in fact did and do so is undeniable, especially (but not only) in the complex circumstances of the Iranian Revolution. “A distinctive feature of the Iranian Revolution was the participation of large groups of women,” writes a feminist scholar.²⁸ “Women have acquired a very prominent position in the ideology as well as practice of the

²⁴ Caroline Ziemke, “The National Myth and Strategic Personality of Iran: A Counterproliferation Perspective,” in *The Coming Crisis: Nuclear Proliferation, US Interests, and World Order*, ed. Victor A. Utgoff (Cambridge, Mass.: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2000), pp. 98-99 (emphasis added).

²⁵ Patrick Sookhdeo, *Global Jihad* (McLean, Virginia: Isaac, 2007), pp. 28-29.

²⁶ Kay S. Hymowitz, “Why Feminism is AWOL on Islam,” *City Journal*, Winter 2003.

²⁷ Ruth Roded, *Women in Islam and the Middle East* (London: I.B.Tauris, 1999), p. 255.

²⁸ Anne Betteridge, “To Veil or Not to Veil: A Matter of Protest or Policy” in *Women and Revolution in Iran*, ed. Guity Nashat (Boulder: Westview Press, 1983), 109.

Islamic Revolution and the Islamic Republic.” This is often explained away as part of the general opposition to the Shah rather than enthusiasm for a specifically Islamist regime, but this is much too easy. “In the case of women...the most militant advocates of Islamisation are among the highly educated graduates of universities.”²⁹ These were consciously dedicated Islamist women, attired decidedly in veils, and often armed. “Observers have all noted the presence and activism of women in the Islamist movement,” writes Olivier Roy; “recall the demonstrations of armed and veiled women in Iran.”³⁰

Political correctness notwithstanding, these women are not coerced into this involvement. They are operatives in a movement consciously determined to acquire political power, and they understand very well that claiming sexual purity is the most effective means of acquiring it.

Even today, as young women from Europe and America enlist in the ranks of the fanatical Islamic State, it is clear that they do so because they seek both power for themselves and to attach themselves to powerful men (thus exploiting, as feminism itself does, both male and female forms of power). Female recruits supervise the morals brigades, policing the public sexual morality of the occupied territories. “Al-Khanssaa patrols walk the streets of Raqqa seeking out inappropriate mixing of the sexes and anyone engaging in Western culture,” according to one scholar.

And it is the women fleeing Western decadence who are the most zealous. “The British women are being given key roles in the brigade because they are considered by ISIL commanders to be the most committed of the foreign female jihadis to the cause,” according to the *Daily Telegraph*, quoting Melanie Smith of the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation at King’s College, London: “The British women are some of the most zealous in imposing the IS laws in the region.” But it is not just that they want power for themselves; they also want to be the brides of powerful men:

²⁹ Afsaneh Najmabadi, “Hazards of Modernity and Morality: Women, State, and Ideology in Contemporary Iran,” in *Women, Islam, and the State*, ed. Deniz Kandiyoti (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 63–64.

³⁰ Olivier Roy, *Failure of Political Islam* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 59.

Many of the women heading for Syria had gone there to find a husband among the jihadi fighters...

Miss Smith says the jihadi social media is “buzzing” with marriage proposals, and many of the fighters have taken several wives...

Miss Smith said a famous Dutch jihadi, known as Yilmaz, who married this week has “broken the hearts” of scores of Western Muslim women who have all made marriage proposals in the last few months.

A monitor of Yilmaz’s internet accounts show [sic] that he received an astonishing 10,000 marriage requests during his time as a jihadi fighter up until his marriage.

Miss Smith said: “It is clear that some of these women who have been travelling to Syria have since married jihadists and foreign fighters.” Some, said Miss Smith, want to marry a martyr.³¹

Nina Shea comments: “She is no innocent, duped into a life of terror, or pushover for male domination,” she writes of one of the leading morals policewomen. “She is living refutation of the theory that female empowerment alone is the path to Islamic moderation, as the State Department has long maintained. . . . For too long, American forces seemed to underestimate such women, taking them to be simply victims within a large undifferentiated class of oppressed women.”³²

As often, both sides of the dynamic involve power, both directly for themselves and indirectly through new husbands. Thus they have the advantages of all worlds: exercising power as both inflictors and victims. The power dynamic and the dilemma it poses for Western liberalism is embodied in the Dutch woman who joined jihadists because she wanted to escape Western androgyny and marry a “real man”^{33, 34} The headline is revealing of Western moral and

³¹ *Daily Telegraph*, “British Female Jihadis Sign Up to the Islamic State’s All-Women Police Force,” 7 September 2014 (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/terrorism-in-the-uk/11079386/British-female-jihadis-sign-up-to-the-Islamic-States-all-women-police-force.html>).

³² Nina Shea, “Equal Opportunity Terrorism,” *The Weekly Standard*, 19 October 2015 (http://www.weeklystandard.com/articles/equal-opportunity-terrorism_1042864.html).

³³ *Daily Telegraph*, 23 November 2013 (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/islamic-state/11247941/Dutch-jihadi-bride-Is-she-a-victim-or-a-suspect.html>).

legal confusion: “Dutch jihadi bride: 'Is she a victim or a suspect?’”

RELIGIOUS RADICALISM IN THE WEST

The West also has a rich experience of grappling with not only sexual issues but also their larger political implications, and in the process it created its own radical religious movements with profound consequences for modern history. Some now suggest that this resembles today’s Islamist militancy. The most successful practitioners of the principle of repressing sexual license and harnessing sexual energy in the service of civic freedom – whose influence has passed directly to our own political culture – were, as their name suggests, the Puritans.

The popular understanding of “Puritan” as abstinence from pleasure, including sexual pleasure, may indeed be that movement’s most significant legacy (and ironically, the one least examined by scholars).³⁵ In both England and New England, campaigns against personal vice – not only sexual license, but swearing, drinking, gambling, blood sports, and other popular indulgences – involved much more than “the haunting fear that someone, somewhere may be happy,” in the famous words of H.L. Mencken. Very decided public aims lay behind these prohibitions: to create virtuous citizens. Puritanism might thus be seen as a massive program to implement what has since become the cliché that the price of freedom is eternal vigilance.³⁶ The Puritans saw freedom as beyond the reach of people who wallowed in indulgence and licentiousness. Self-government required self-control. “There is a service which is freedom, the service of Christ; and there is a freedom which is servitude, freedom to sin,” one minister told the House of Commons during the English Revolution. “There is a liberty which is bondage and...a bondage which is liberty.”³⁷

Not accidentally, these puritans in the popular sense were also early modern Europe’s most sophisticated political activists. Indeed, they have been plausibly credited with nothing less than

³⁴ For more on this, see the Conclusion.

³⁵ Stephen Baskerville, *Not Peace but a Sword: The Political Theology of the English Revolution* (London: Routledge, 1993; expanded edition, Wipf & Stock, forthcoming).

³⁶ Michael Walzer, “The Revolutionary Uses of Repression,” in *Essays in Theory and History*, ed. Melvin Richter (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1970).

³⁷ Baskerville, *Not Peace but a Sword* (1993), p. 176.

“the origins of radical politics.”³⁸ Their drive for personal purity was writ large in a simultaneous campaign for ecclesiastical purification, and from there to advocacy for political reform. The Puritans developed an elaborate political theology with revolutionary implications.

The politics were played out in two events of inestimable importance for modern history: the colonization of what became the United States, whose strongly religious political culture – unique in the West today – is a direct legacy of Puritanism (and continues as a major player in today’s sexual politics); and the first of the great modern revolutions, the English Revolution of the 1640s, which set the pattern for others to come – including the American, French, and Russian revolutions, and even Iran’s Islamic Revolution of 1979.

Both Puritan commonwealths did exhibit violent and theocratic tendencies, which renders comparisons with today’s Islamist theocracies at least superficially plausible. Yet the contrasts may be more instructive than the similarities. Theocratic campaigns were moderated by the dualisms that exist in Christianity but not in Islam and other religions: the “two kingdoms,” *regnum* and *sacerdotum*, church and state, sacred and secular, eternal and temporal. These dualisms recognized the legitimacy of secular institutions, allowing the lay leadership in the English Revolution to retain the upper hand and preventing the clergy or any particular denomination from dominating the state, while still serving as a watchdog on it.

Inseparable from this, the Puritans were obsessed with a connected matter of profound and continuing influence on today’s politics, producing early modern Europe’s most voluminous literature on the organization and operation of the family. This was hardly a quietist withdrawal from the public square into private life. On the contrary, the family was Puritanism’s institution for connecting sexuality and civic life. The Puritans considered the family a “little commonwealth,” where family members, especially children, were trained in the habits and techniques of citizenship.³⁹ Relevant here is that women were assigned essential responsibilities, and despite their modern image as champions of the “patriarchal” family, the Puritans attracted

³⁸ Michael Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1965).

³⁹ John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970); Stephen Baskerville, “The Family in Puritan Political Theology,” *Journal of Family History*, vol. 18, no. 2 (1993).

educated women in large numbers.⁴⁰ Like the church, of which is served as the lowest administrative unit, the family acted as a counterbalance and check to the state.

Puritanism is also renowned for promoting economic prosperity, supplying the evidence for the “Protestant ethic” thesis of Max Weber. Given that the family is also the most basic unit of economic production, one consequence is almost certainly the material prosperity of the West especially. This, as much or more than the Puritan soteriology where Weber and most of his followers principally identified it (though Weber himself did not ignore the family), is likely to be the basis of the Protestant ethic of conscientious work leading to widespread affluence.

ISLAM’S REFORMATION?

Some suggest that Muslim experience today parallels the West’s Puritan past. “Islamic fundamentalist sexual puritanism has more in common with seventeenth-century Christian Puritanism than with the sexual mores of either the Prophet Mohammad, Islam, historical Shiism or most Iranians,” insists Masoud Kazemzadeh.⁴¹ Even allowing for differences, if the West emerged from its own revolutionary wars of religion and religious intolerance as a free society and a global powerhouse, perhaps similar potential exists in Islam? Hypothesizing further, if Western freedom and prosperity came not despite Puritan sexual discipline but because of it, perhaps radical Islam may do likewise?

Yet it does not necessarily follow that all forms of religious radicalism are equally effective in processing the rage and resentment that fuels them. In this case, the differences could hardly be more striking. (And what follows are preliminary suggestions on which more research from scholars qualified in Islam is needed.)

⁴⁰ See for example Jacqueline Eales, *Puritans and Roundheads: The Harleys of Brampton Bryan and the Outbreak of the English Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁴¹ Masoud Kazemzadeh, *Islamic Fundamentalism, Feminism, and Gender Inequality in Iran Under Khomeini* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2002), 97. But to say (p. 7) that “the puritanism of contemporary Islamic fundamentalists has more in common with the puritanism of contemporary Christian fundamentalists and Jewish fundamentalists than with the ethos of original Islam” is nonsense. Neither Christian nor Jewish “fundamentalists” are advocating, let alone practicing, terror.

Islamism does not appear to have the tools to translate its resentments into political, social, and economic modernity. Rather than producing the freedom, stability, and prosperity for which the Puritans are credited, radical Islamism (thus far) leads to continued rage and self-pity, along with their accompaniments of instability, stagnation, and terror.

Several apparent reasons are often cited: undiluted theocracy rather than separate spheres for church and state; the absence of an institutionalized and hierarchical church to serve as an alternative polity, check state power, and discipline its own members; no real concept of a “state” whose power can be defined and limited; theological legalism and obscurantism, rather than an ethic of renewal and forgiveness.⁴²

Whatever the explanatory value of these theological contrasts, they have counterparts in sexual morality. Indeed, the role of women has long distinguished sharply Islamic from Christian civilization. A Turkish envoy in Vienna in the seventeenth century (the apogee of Puritanism and political Calvinism) wrote of a “most extraordinary spectacle”: “In this country and in general in the lands of the unbelievers, women have the main say.” Bernard Lewis writes that for centuries, “The difference in the position of women was indeed one of the most striking contrasts between Christian and Muslim practice and is mentioned by almost all travelers in both directions.” Lewis himself describes the status of women as “probably the most profound single difference between the two civilizations.” Noting that “The social systems of the East and West are established on diametrically different principles,” the noted researcher Ruth Woodsmall believed that “The pivotal difference is the position of women.”⁴³

The moral discipline and self-repression Puritans saw as the precondition for freedom has become for Islamists simply sexual (and political) repression for its own sake, to the point of internal as well as external terror. In both instances, repression may be enforced by legal sanctions, but in Puritanism it began from an imperative for inner renewal. The individual’s internal renewal was then externalized in the communal church, which was described as a kind

⁴² Robert Reilly, *The Closing of the Muslim Mind: How Intellectual Suicide Created the Modern Islamist Crisis* (Wilmington: ISI, 2011).

⁴³ Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 66-67; Woodsmall quoted in Buruma and Margalit, *Occidentalism*.

of extended family (the “bride of Christ”). Only from there, did it provide the drive for reform and for wielding power in the state. Legal enforcement of morality by the state machinery was usually the last resort, not the first impulse.

The Muslim family does not seem capable of channeling sexual energy into either economic prosperity or political freedom. Perhaps this is because there is no clearly defined state for it to exist in distinction to. Just as the mosque cannot counterbalance the state because neither is clearly defined or distinguished, neither can the family because there is no recognized duality of public and private.

Sublimating sexual energy for political purposes is clearly fundamental to radical Islam, and though similarities to Puritanism exist, the process appears to be very different. “In the Muslim order it is not necessary for the individual to eradicate his instincts or to control them for the sake of control itself, but he must use them according to the demands of religious law,” writes Fatima Mernissi. “Aggression and sexual desire, for example, if harnessed in the right direction, serve the purposes of the Muslim order.”⁴⁴ The great Ibn Khaldun wrote that “when he [Muhammad] censures the desires, he does not want them to be abolished altogether...He wants the desire to be used for permissible purposes to serve the public interests, so that man becomes an active servant of God who willingly obeys the divine commands.” Sensual delights on earth even offer a “foretaste” and therefore an incentive to delay gratification now in expectation of greater delights in heaven:

Sexual desire...is a foretaste of the delights secured for men in Paradise, because to make a promise to men of delights they have not tasted before would be ineffective.... Therefore the desire to reach the heavenly delight is so powerful that it helps men to persevere in pious activities in order to be admitted to heaven.⁴⁵

Muslim sexual asceticism also applies very differently for men and women. This is more complex than mere “sexism”; both the restrictions and rewards are geared to male functionality.

⁴⁴ Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 27-28.

⁴⁵ Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

Sexual discipline clearly has a utilitarian value, but Islamist soteriology appears to make sex a reward for political and especially military service, demonstrating both the importance of the sexual-political trade-off and the one-dimensionality of the Islamist system for harnessing it. Heaven is likewise conceptualized in terms of male desire. “Paradise is full of sensual pleasures in which there are beautiful women, couches covered with brocades, plentiful wine and luscious fruits,” writes Patrick Sookhdeo. “Essentially it is the place where that which is forbidden on earth becomes allowed.”⁴⁶

Economically, the Islamist revolt against “imperialism and capitalism” so far produces only stagnation. Scholars seek in vain for any affinity of Muslim with Puritan asceticism. “The main historical examples in the central Islamic lands...[are] very far from the Puritan characterization,” writes Sami Zubaida. “There are no grounds...for attributing Puritanism (in Weber’s sense) to urban religious cultures in the Muslim world.” Further: “Whatever the rights and wrong of Weber’s characterization of his Protestants, his picture is certainly at great variance with all we know of the Muslim bourgeoisie in a variety of historical and geographical settings.”⁴⁷

Even Islamist sexual puritanism may result from a political calculation. “Looking at themselves through European eyes, these groups were anxious to banish all the negative stereotypes of lascivious sexuality, fanaticism, and superstition,” Zubaida argues. “Their construction of pure Islam, therefore, underplayed or omitted all the elements in the holy book and the traditions that endorsed or sanctioned such practices.”⁴⁸ In this sense then too, radical Islamism is a Western import. “Far from being the received Islam...it was a brand-new, invented Islam that...also incorporated, without acknowledgment, many ‘Western’ ideas – from the revolutionary puritanism of Robespierre to the ‘propaganda of the deed’ advocated by the Baader-Meinhof gang.”⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Patrick Sookhdeo, *Challenge of Islam* (McLean, Virginia: Isaac: 2008), pp. 30-31. See also “Sex Jihad Raging in Syria, Claims Minister,” *Daily Telegraphy*, 20 September 2013 (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10322578/Sex-Jihad-raging-in-Syria-claims-minister.htm>).

⁴⁷ Sami Zubaida, *Beyond Islam: A New Understanding of the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), pp. 55, 57, 59.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 59-60.

⁴⁹ Malise Ruthven, “‘Born-again’ Muslims: Cultural Schizophrenia,” Open Democracy site, 10 September 2009,

Regarding Islamism as a political religion that borrows from secular ideology as needed, it is not surprising that it can engage in a paradoxical *pas de deux* with feminism⁵⁰. Ideologies seldom uphold fixed principles for long, and in the interminable debates about the compatibility of feminism and Islamism one might well detect echoes of the principle observed by Milovan Djilas during the Communism of the 1950s: “Power is the alpha and the omega of contemporary Communism,” he wrote. “Ideas, philosophical principles, and moral considerations, the nation and the people, their history... – all can be changed and sacrificed. But not power.”⁵¹ Islamists and feminists, like many of us, share the human craving for power. If it can be acquired through the veil, the veil will be worn and rationalized. If not, it will be discarded. But the central criterion is what maximizes power – or, in today’s formulation, “empowerment.”

Homosexual activists have adopted similar methods. It may be no accident that Islamists and homosexualists share an acute sensitivity to criticism, have devised parallel language to express parallel grievances against “Islamophobia” and “homophobia,” and demand government protection from “discrimination” and “harassment,” which is often defined as private individuals expressing their views or the tenets of their faith. These two groups alone successfully demand government-enforced immunity from criticism and punishment of those they deem guilty of “hate speech” for criticizing them or their political agenda.

http://www.opendemocracy.net/faith-islamicworld/article_103.jsp.

⁵⁰ A particularly striking example of the disparity between the media depiction of women in Islamic societies as victims and the reality of their political power is provided by divorce law (as we have seen, a major component behind Islamic accusations of Western decadence). Many Islamic countries have already enacted what amounts to no-fault divorce, which confers enormous power on women. “Through talaq-i-tafweez the wife can initiate divorce without requiring any permission or agreement from the husband, and retains all her financial rights,” we are told. “She does not have to prove any grounds for divorce.” Most significantly, she also retains control and custody of children. Compared with this awesome power, regulations controlling women’s fashions are trivial. Muslim Marriage Contract website: http://muslimmarriagecontract.org/contract.html#delegation_of_divorce (accessed 16 December 2013). In the West too, divorce provides women with enormous political power below the media radar screen, including the silver bullet that cuts through religious principles. See Baskerville, *Taken Into Custody*. Puritanism may have played a role here too, though precisely what role is unclear. Most Puritan ministers violently opposed the (Puritan) poet John Milton’s proposal during the English Civil War to liberalize divorce laws. But perhaps the significance of the controversy is simply that it arose in the context of the English Revolution, when other radical ideas were in the air, as it was to do again in the American, French, Russian, and indeed, Iranian revolutions.

⁵¹ *The New Class* (New York: Praeger, 1958), p. 170.

CONCLUSION

Every society must control sex, and the most effective mechanism for controlling sex is religion. “Religion is central to sexual regulation in almost all societies,” writes Altman. “Indeed, it may well be that the primary social function of religion is to control sexuality.” This oversimplifies the matter, but the point is crucial.

Our modern illusion that we can simply ignore sexuality and leave it unregulated is highly naïve and leaves us vulnerable not only to social anomie, but also to those who will step in and regulate it for their own purposes. As we have seen, even the Soviets had to impose limits. “Whether it be Catholicism, Hinduism, Islam, or Communism, religions tend to claim a particular right to regulate and restrict sexuality, a right which is often recognized by state authorities.”⁵²

In confronting this phenomenon, we dispense with traditional religious faith at the risk of incurring some unforeseen consequences. The alternative is already clear in our own, relatively stable societies, where the explosion of single-parent homes in a financially unsustainable welfare state threatens social stability, economic solvency, and even civic freedom.⁵³

When traditional religion is no longer able to effectively regulate sexual energy, radical political ideologies, including politicized religions – all armed with various political theologies and invariably backed by state functionaries – move in to fill the void. It is by no means fanciful to suggest that the decline of Christian faith in the West – along with the discrediting of secular ideologies that have dominated the West intellectually from the Enlightenment through the Cold War – has left a vacuum that is now being filled by radical Islam. To the liberal mind and its obsession with “progress,” Islamism appears to be a perplexing throwback to a “medieval” age. In fact, as our own history makes clear, it is very modern indeed: a radical ideology that harnesses sexual energy and channels it into political revolution.

⁵² Altman, *Global Sex*, p. 6.

⁵³ Stephen Baskerville, “From Welfare State to Police State,” *The Independent Review*, vol. 12, no. 3 (Winter 2008).

The fact that in the West sexual freedom has itself become politicized in an ideology of its own confirms that a major and complex ideological realignment in international politics has emerged as the direct result of the decline of Christian faith in the West and the consequent rise of politicized sexuality. In the global South too, it is very likely that the Christian revival now sweeping that region is, if not driven, at least occasioned as a response to sexual radicalism. “Most of the reasons for this involve disputes over gender and sexuality,” writes Philip Jenkins. “These have provided the defining issues that separate progressives and conservatives, ecclesiastical left and right.”⁵⁴ The same might be said of secular political left and right.

Given all this, how do we confront the Muslim world? Islamism is not like the economic ideology of Communism that can be discredited once and for all (apparently) by its demonstrable economic failure. Islam and the radical tendencies it sends forth will likely be with us for some time. We need to diffuse as well as defeat those tendencies.

It is no accident that Islamists claim jihad is a struggle for their “manhood” – a theme conspicuously absent in our evolving Western gender awareness paradigm but one that bears on both the military and sexual dimensions of the problem, and well beyond Islamism. (Similar themes can be found in the literature of Hindutva and politically aggressive Buddhism.) Any soldier will attest that it is always unwise to humiliate your enemy, and Islamism is an ideology that is quite purposefully designed to prompt an aggressive response to humiliation. Our aim must not be to destroy manhood, whether militarily or ideologically. For the sake of both civilizations, it may be a matter of finding the right way to accommodate it.

⁵⁴ Philip Jenkins, *The New Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 246.

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BEING MALE IN A FEMINIST CULTURE¹

Janice Fiamengo



ABSTRACT

According to our dominant cultural narrative, men in western societies are privileged and powerful, and have used their power throughout history to oppress and control women. Men's own accounts of their experiences, however, tell a very different story. They highlight how it feels to believe, with justification, that one is unwelcome--even despised--in one's own society. Such stories of alienation must no longer be ignored. We can keep on telling men that when they articulate experiences of powerlessness and injustice, they're really just bitter about sharing power with women, but the sting of the injustice will not thereby diminish. We can keep on showing men that if they object to the feminist story, a massive arsenal of shame will be unleashed upon them, but that will only increase men's anger and withdrawal.

Keywords: feminism's false narrative of male privilege; men's experience; injustice against men

¹ From *Sons of Feminism: Men Have Their Say*, 2nd ed. (Ottawa: Little Nightingale Press, 2018), with permission.

There's no easier way to get yourself labeled a kook or a hater than to say that you're an advocate for men's rights (or "men's issues," as some like to say in an attempt to lower the derision-level.) "Are you for real?" and "Cry me a river" are predictable responses.ⁱ Empathy for male suffering is one of our society's biggest taboos, and those who break it are often rebuked by being told that, whatever men might suffer, women suffer far more, as if human empathy were a zero-sum game.ⁱⁱ If men are so powerful, one wonders, how come it is so difficult to speak about men's problems?ⁱⁱⁱ

Some advocates for men bend over backwards to try to pre-empt the usual dismissals and rebuttals, emphasizing that they recognize that women still have many challenges in our society and that they support women wholeheartedly in their efforts to achieve equality. Such professions, no matter how sincere (and in my experience, they are almost *always* sincere), don't seem to help: on the contrary, often they make detractors even more angry, leading them to charge men's advocates with duplicity and dishonesty as well as woman-hatred, that most damning of accusations.^{iv}

Even the acronym MRA (Men's Rights Activist) has now become a slur, as in "MRAs! Go away!" chanted by protesters at men's events. For years, whenever the men's advocacy group I belong to has tried to host a speaker at my university campus—including such gentle souls as scholar Paul Nathanson or the equity feminist journalist Cathy Young—students calling themselves the Revolutionary Students Movement put up posters calling on the university community to "Join the Fight Against MRA Reactionaries!"^v Note the assumption that caring about men's issues makes one a "reactionary." Our group's desire to talk sympathetically about men's lives outside a feminist framework caused these students such outrage that they regularly tore down our posters, blocked the entranceways to rooms where talks were being held, and pulled the fire alarm to disrupt the speaker.

It is generally accepted in our society that men have it easy. According to our dominant cultural narrative, men are "privileged." They hold power, including power over women, and they have used that power throughout history to oppress women.^{vi} They are the decision makers in our societies, and they make decisions that benefit men and disadvantage women.^{vii} Men's voices carry the weight of centuries of authority, and they use that authority to objectify and

dehumanize women. Many men hate women, perhaps because they envy them, and the proof of their hatred is etched in our cultural history.^{viii} That's the story.

It doesn't matter how much evidence shows that it isn't the case. It doesn't matter how many examples of male suffering and sacrifice are brought forward—or conversely, how many examples of male admiration, respect, and love for women can be cited.^{ix} The story of male advantage and female disadvantage is a cultural narrative of such undisputed validity that it seems impervious to contrary evidence.

In my introduction to *Sons of Feminism: Men Have Their Say*, I originally attempted to sum up the situation of men today in western societies: with data on such issues as male suicide, depression, homelessness, joblessness, declining numbers at post-secondary institutions, unequal treatment in family court, disproportionate criminal sentences, and experience of discrimination in hiring practices. I sought to show that the narrative of male privilege simply did not correspond to men's actual experience of falling behind in employment and education, of blatant job discrimination, of being deprived of the right to parent their children, and so on. I documented the taken-for-granted misandry that passes for informed opinion in the mainstream news, the regularity with which men, alone of all socially identifiable groups, are negatively stereotyped, the ease with which pundits dismiss and deride their issues. I sought to head off objections, shore up the men's rights position, make a watertight case that men are not merely whining about the loss of their much-vaunted privilege—that men have always suffered and sacrificed, have always been disposable, have always given, often out of love, a great deal of their blood, sweat, and tears.

I scrapped that introduction because it was turning into a ponderous dissertation, statistics-heavy and pedantic, and moreover one that said nothing that had not already been said before by researchers who know the subject far better than I do, and whom I invite you to consult to investigate the reality behind the stories in this book (please see the Recommended Reading section below). If it were a matter of presenting compelling fact-based arguments, the myth of male privilege (and female powerlessness) would have been decisively demolished long ago, in books such as Warren Farrell's *The Myth of Male Power: Why Men are the Disposable Sex* (1993). If it were a matter of showing the dishonesty and inaccuracy of feminist statistics about rape or domestic violence or employment discrimination, Christina Hoff Sommers' *Who Stole*

Feminism: How Women Have Betrayed Women (1994) and her subsequent Factual Feminist video series would have conclusively delegitimized feminism as a social scientific theory. If it were a matter of showing with abundant examples and rigorous analysis the damage done by feminist policies to make workplaces pro-female, then Daphne Patai's *Heterophobia: Sexual Harassment and the Future of Feminism* (1998) would have reversed the direction of contemporary HR interventions in large corporations, businesses, university classrooms, and government offices. If it were a matter of showing feminism's glaring illogic and irrational animus towards men, the smash-hit videos of anti-feminists such as Karen Straughan and Paul Elam (and many others) would have brought the whole house of cards down. Yet the policies, the statistics, and the beliefs remain powerful, perhaps now more powerful than ever.

Statistics tell us only so much. Men's own accounts provide another perspective about how it feels to believe, with justification, that one is unwelcome—even despised—in one's own society.^x We can keep on telling men that they're privileged, that they have power, but the number of men able to believe that comforting myth is fast dwindling. We can keep on telling men that when they articulate experiences of powerlessness and injustice, they're really just bitter about sharing power with women, but the sting of the injustice will not thereby diminish.^{xi} We can keep on showing men that if they object to the feminist story, a massive arsenal of shame will be unleashed upon them, but that will only increase men's anger and withdrawal.^{xiii}

I first started to wonder about men's experiences when I became a full-time university teacher in 1999. It was hard not to notice, as a Professor of English, that male numbers in the Humanities were in rapid decline, and that nobody seemed to care (at least, that the fact was never mentioned by anyone at the university). Men now make up only about one quarter of students who study English at my university, and they are a clear minority at universities overall (about 40% of the student body at universities across North America).^{xiii} There are complex reasons for the male decline, but it seems indisputable that at least one of the reasons is a demonstrably anti-male environment in the university classroom and in the larger society.

Feminist and other sociological approaches to the study of western culture associate masculinity with violence, oppression, and unjust hierarchy; femininity, in contrast, is associated with life, love, and healing. The message in nearly every literature classroom in the country is some variation of this: women's literature should be respectfully studied as evidence of the

positive contribution made by women to culture; men's literature should be critiqued as evidence of how men have oppressed women and have been responsible for the social ills of war, poverty, violence, and environmental degradation.

I began to wonder what it must be like listening to that, in all its versions, day after day, month after month, year after year—learning that women are vulnerable, courageous, and admirable while men are dangerous and despicable, being told that your sex had it too good for too long, and that you need to apologize for that and be ashamed of it your whole life. In campus culture as a whole, men are told that they contribute to a rape culture in which women are terrorized by male sexual violence and by men's failure to take it seriously or to act to change their "toxic masculinity."^{xiv}

I began to speak publicly about my perception of the bias against men in academia. My lectures were often protested by feminist and social justice groups, who said that my criticisms of feminism denied the reality of rape and encouraged men to be violent.^{xv} When I was prevented from speaking at my own university, feminist activists were pleased that my hateful message had been silenced.^{xvi}

I didn't (and don't) accept their account of who I am or what I know. I am neither a "rape apologist" nor a brave heroine. I merely seek to tell the truth as I understand it, and to shed light on what seems to me the greatest and most under-recognized injustice of our time. To see men cruelly treated, misrepresented, and unjustly blamed in our society with no public outcry violates the commitment to fairness that my parents taught me as a child. As someone who grew up in the 1970s, in the immediate wake of the women's movement, I was the beneficiary of male willingness to end sexist discrimination and to support women in pursuing their career aspirations. I encountered nothing from my many male teachers, mentors, friends, and colleagues but decency, generosity, and commitment to excellence. I grew up in a culture in which I always knew that the men in my life cared about me and listened to me; why shouldn't women also care about and listen to men? This book is an attempt to repay a debt of gratitude and to right a wrong.

From the time my first public talk in 2013 was posted on YouTube, my inbox was flooded with emails from men young and old who told me of their experiences.

They told of how they'd been falsely accused of sexual assault or harassment at their university or workplace.^{xvii} One young man was expelled from an American university after two women complained about him; apparently, as he was told by the harassment officer, his "gaze was too intense." Another man lost his job due to the complaints of several women on his shop floor: one woman had complained because he "[stood] too close" (though he studiously avoided her from the moment he learned of the complaint) and another because he had called and spoken to her on the phone at her house (thinking they were friends) and then called again because he couldn't believe she had actually reported him to the police for that. Many young men were investigated and humiliated merely for asking girls out on dates or trying to strike up a romantic friendship, not realizing that what seemed like shy encouragement was actually an inability to say no. One man told about being publicly shamed for objecting to a teacher's assertion that all men needed to be taught not to rape. One man related his experience of sexual assault by a gang of older girls when he was fourteen years old.

I heard about a feminist vigilante group that drove a man out of his job and destroyed his reputation, accusing him of murder after a mentally ill woman who had been in love with him committed suicide. One man showed me irrefutable evidence of the near impossibility of his advancing in his academic job while women with far fewer credentials regularly received plum positions at top-tier universities because of the push to hire women into STEM fields. Yet still this man had to attend gender- and race-sensitivity workshops in which he was compelled to confess his privilege as a white man.

One man told me about being beaten by the police and left permanently disabled because of a woman's false allegation; he has endured a lengthy, financially debilitating court case on a false charge of resisting arrest. Another man was accused of raping his estranged teenage daughter, who made up a story so that she wouldn't have to live at home anymore. With no evidence other than her testimony, the man was sentenced to seven years in prison, where he is now serving his time.

Many men experienced terrible divorces in which they were threatened that if they objected to any of their wives' financial demands, they would lose access to their children. Many never saw their children again anyway, even though they paid out hundreds of thousands of dollars in alimony and child support over the years.

I heard from young men who said that from day one in public school, they were told explicitly and implicitly that girls' lives mattered more, that girls needed to be respected and treated well and supported and encouraged, and boys didn't need that or deserve that. They learned that boys needed to be reformed through lectures about the dangers of their masculinity; they had to learn that they could hurt girls, sometimes just by looking at them.

I heard from young men about what it was like to be raised by a mother who didn't like men, and who made them terrified of their own sexuality. I heard from men whose experience of abuse or neglect at the hands of a feminist mother was so extreme that it left them permanently skeptical about our culture's tendency to see women as innocent victims.

I heard from men about their anguish at being told that they were a danger to women and a blight on society, when all they had ever wanted was to love and cherish a wife and family. I heard from many young men about the difficulty of knowing how to behave around a young woman, whether *any* behavior was not harassment.

The messages I received totally contradicted the feminist narrative of how relatively easy it is to be male in our culture, how men have a sense of entitlement with regard to women, how men have power and women don't, and how when men are angry about feminism, it's because they don't like the idea of sharing their privilege with women.

Over the years, after receiving hundreds of such emails, I came to realize that their stories weren't just for me. The idea for *Sons of Feminism: Men Have Their Say* was born.

I received over 60 submissions in response to my question, 'How has feminism affected you?' Sent from contributors in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, Germany, the Netherlands, France, and South Africa, the stories ranged from a few paragraphs to 18,000 words, and told of loneliness, injustice, and a deep sense of alienation. For readers who believe that feminism is about gender equality, these stories offer a powerful corrective. A number of the contributors chose anonymity because of the risks associated with speaking against our cultural orthodoxy.

I couldn't include all the submissions: the book would have been too long, and probably

overwhelming. It was difficult to select among the compelling, often heartbreaking, stories of personal pain and insight. In the end, I chose essays that represent a cross-section of experiences and perspectives, some focusing on specific injustices and others commenting more generally on the blame, ridicule, and lack of empathy directed men's way simply because they are male.

I don't expect that ideologues will change their minds upon reading them, but I am hopeful that some non-ideologues will hear what these men are saying and may be moved to listen more carefully to the men in their own lives when they talk about their experiences and problems.

A few general observations can be made about the contributions I received, even those I was not able to include.

First, not one of the contributors expressed any hatred of women as a sex. Most were not even particularly angry at the specific women or feminist authorities whose actions harmed them. On the contrary, most expressed love for women and the desire to protect them, which many believe to be an innate part of who they are as men. Their reaction to feminism is a profound sense of bafflement and a visceral rejection of its characterization of them as sexually violent or entitled. Many of these men declare that their deepest longing—sadly unfulfilled for a large number—is to experience a tender intimacy with a woman.

Likewise, not a single one of the contributors expressed any discomfort with the principle or practice of equality before the law. Many welcomed aspects of the feminist revolution of the 1960s, specifically concerning the liberation of both men and women from restrictive gender roles. Many were more than happy to take a more active role in parenting (and devastated when they were denied the right to be a parent). Many were happy with the idea of women taking a more active role in initiating sexual relations (and frustrated to discover that most women would not do so).

Not one contributor expressed any skepticism about women's ability to compete with men intellectually, or to assume leadership roles in business and government. What did cause objection was the consistent undermining of claims of equality by feminist practices of overt discrimination against men and unfair advantages for women, which many men could not help but observe at school, in the workplace, in law, and in social attitudes. For many men, these

inequities have become so egregious and long-lived as to be intolerable.

A number of the contributors to this book have been victims of violence, in some cases by female loved ones, especially mothers or girlfriends/wives. For these men, the feminist emphasis on male violence against women—with the corollary assumptions that males are rarely victims of violence and females almost never the perpetrators—is both a soul-searing denial of their experience and a factor in their inability to receive the help they needed or even to have their suffering believed. To be a victim of violence is always terrible, but to have that experienced belittled, denied, or ignored is even worse. Services for male victims are in shockingly scarce supply in our ostensibly victim-conscious culture, and public sympathy or recognition is just as rare.

As a number of the contributors to this book note, feminism is not the sole cause of the often-painful experiences related here, and in some cases it is perhaps not even the determining cause. The issue may well be more general: a culture that has always prioritized women's safety and well-being over men's. But the fact that feminist leaders and activists have not shown themselves actively interested in the kinds of experiences recounted here has, in my opinion, entirely undermined their claims to represent an equality movement.

It is also true, of course, that if I had sought from men accounts of positive experiences of feminism, I would have been able to find some. There are many male feminists, some quite famous, who are enthusiastic about condemning male perfidy,^{xviii} enumerating the benefits to men of joining the feminist revolution, and analyzing “Guyland” in a patronizing, negative manner.^{xix} The stories in *Sons of Feminism: Men Have Their Say* represent the voices that are rarely heard or validated in our politically correct culture. Naysayers will claim that these stories are examples of “cherry-picking,” but on the contrary they are fully representative of all that I have heard from men and observed with my own eyes over the past years. I affirm that they will resonate with many, and that there is nothing peculiar or idiosyncratic about them. On that basis, those who claim to care about equality and justice should pay them heed.

Men have always known that, under certain circumstances like war, dangerous work, or threats to family, their lives are expendable. Most men, for physiological and psychological reasons, have been willing to accept that reality in exchange for the basic social recognition that

once came with it. To be told, as now, that not only are their lives still expendable but that their very existence is often unwanted, and that they must constantly apologize for and unlearn their toxic masculinity, is an assault on male dignity that has become unendurable for more and more men.

What happens to men when their sense of worth and purpose are actively denied and undermined by the culture at large? The accounts in *Sons of Feminism: Men Have Their Say* tell that story.

We ignore such accounts at our grave peril, for a society cannot flourish if it tells men that they do not matter. It makes pragmatic sense to listen to men's concerns—but I hope that readers of this book will listen for other reasons as well, out of empathy and love.

RECOMMENDED READING

- Stephen Baskerville. *Taken into Custody: The War against Fathers, Marriage, and the Family*. Nashville: Cumberland House, 2007.
- Roy F. Baumeister. *Is There Anything Good About Men? How Cultures Flourish By Exploiting Men*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- John Davis. *False Accusations of Rape: Lynching in the 21st Century*. Old Town Publishing, 2015.
- Warren Farrell. *The Myth of Male Power: Why Men Are the Disposable Sex*. New York: Berkley Books, 1993.
- Warren Farrell. *Why Men Earn More: The Startling Truth Behind the Pay Gap—and What Women Can Do About It*. New York: Amazon, 2005.
- Tim Goldich. *Loving Men, Respecting Women: The Future of Gender Politics*. Chicago: Anima-Animus Publishing, 2011. Revised 2014.
- Tom Golden. *Helping Mothers Be Closer to Their Sons: Understanding the Unique World of Boys*. Gaithersberg, MD: G.H. Publishing, 2016.
- Christina Hoff Sommers. *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Policies Are Harming our Young Men*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000. Revised 2013.
- Christina Hoff Sommers. *Who Stole Feminism? How Women Have Betrayed Women*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994.
- Peter Lloyd. *Stand By Your Manhood: A Game-Changer for Modern Men*. London: Biteback Publishing, 2014.
- Wendy McElroy. *Rape Culture Hysteria: Fixing the Damage Done to Men and Women*. Vulgus Press, 2016.
- Paul Nathanson and Katherine K. Young. *Legalizing Misandry: From Public Shame to Systemic Discrimination Against Men*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006.
- Daphne Patai. *Heterophobia: Sexual Harassment and the Future of Feminism*. Lanham, MD. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1998.
- Herbert Purdy. *Their Angry Creed: The Shocking History of Feminism, and How It Is Destroying Our Way of Life*. Ips Publishing, 2016.
- Steven E. Rhoads. *Taking Sex Differences Seriously*. New York: Encounter Books, 2004.
- David Shackleton. *The Hand That Rocks the World: An Inquiry into Truth, Power, and Gender*. Ottawa: Take2Now, 2015.
- Helen Smith. *Men on Strike: Why Men Are Boycotting Marriage, Fatherhood, and the American Dream—and Why It Matters*. New York: Encounter Books, 2013.
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ENDNOTES

- ⁱ For a representative if particularly unsympathetic feminist response to men's rights activism, see Amanda Marcotte, "The solution to MRA problems? More feminism." *The Daily Dot* 19 January 2015. <https://www.dailydot.com/via/mra-problems-feminism/>. Referring to men's rights activists as "a loose coalition of men embittered that they're not getting as much tail as they believe they're due and men embittered after having their wives up and leave against their wishes," Marcotte could not find a single issue on which men's rights activists had anything legitimate to say: "They're so wrong about everything," she quipped, "they're wrong even when they're right."

- ii In “Why I hate men,” feminist Julie Bindel, after alluding to the “millions” of incidents of male violence and sexual abuse against women as the reason for her hatred, pre-empted reasoned response: “Before the misogynists start ranting on about how many men are abused by women, how many women kill their children, etc, etc, don’t bother. Every piece of credible research produced in every country in the world where this work has been done shows that sexual and domestic violence is committed overwhelmingly by men against females.” Only a misogynist, according to Bindel, would seek to exonerate men from their collective characterization as the killers and abusers of women. She didn’t cite the “credible research” she spoke of so confidently because she couldn’t. Sober statistics demonstrate that men and women are both capable of violence, and that indeed women are more likely than men to kill their children. See Julie Bindel, “Why I hate men.” *The Guardian* 2 November 2006. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2006/nov/02/whyihatemen>.
- For a factual article decisively rebutting Bindel’s claims, see Cathy Young, “Hope Solo and The Surprising Truth About Women and Violence,” *Time* 25 June 2014. <http://time.com/2921491/hope-solo-women-violence/>
- Citing national surveys of domestic violence, Young notes that researchers have consistently found that “women were just as likely as men to report hitting a spouse and men were just as likely as women to report getting hit.” Moreover, Young points out, studies show that women are “at least as likely as men to kill their children—more so if one counts killings of newborns—and account for more than half of child maltreatment perpetrators.” This article has many useful references for those wishing to delve more deeply into the reality of male and female violence.
- iii For an excellent discussion of what he calls an “empathy gap” in western culture, see Glen Poole, “Nine out of ten victims of police-related deaths are male. Who cares?” *InsideMan* 24 July 2015. <http://www.inside-man.co.uk/2015/07/24/nine-out-of-ten-victims-of-police-related-deaths-are-male-who-cares/>
- Poole highlights the gendered nature of news reporting by showing how when men or boys are killed or injured, they are referred to as “people,” while when women or girls are killed or injured, their sex is specified. The only time men and boys are singled out by sex in media reports is when they have committed a crime or perpetrated an atrocity. Thus empathy for male people is consistently minimized while animus against them is heightened.
- iv For a typical example of feminist rage at men’s attempts to empathize with women while articulating discomfort at being held personally responsible for collective male evil, see Andrea Dworkin, “I Want a 24 Hour Truce During Which There is No Rape.” Vancouver Rape Relief and Women’s Shelter. <http://www.rapereliefshelter.bc.ca/learn/resources/i-want-24hour-truce-during-which-there-no-rape>. For Dworkin, the only acceptable stance for a non-violent man is to embrace the harshest of feminist judgements on male perfidy.
- v See “Join the Fight Against MRA Reactionaries! CAFE Has No Place in Our Communities.” 15 March 2016. <http://mer-rsm.ca/join-the-fight-against-mra-reactionaries-cafe-has-no-place-in-our-communities/>
- vi For a pithy articulation of the commonly held view, see Thomas Tudor, “Rabble Rouser: Men have made a mess of society.” *Courier-Post* 25 March 2015. <http://www.courierpostonline.com/story/opinion/readers/2015/03/25/rabble-rouser-men-made-mess-society/70455508/>
- vii For an articulation of the view that men are powerful and women powerless (and that therefore hatred of men is both justifiable and innocuous), one could read nearly any article by feminist columnist Jessica Valenti, but one good example is her “Feminists Don’t Hate Men, But It Wouldn’t Matter if We Did.” *The Guardian US* 13 March 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/mar/13/feminists-do-not-hate-men>
- viii For perhaps the most comprehensive expression of this viewpoint, see Andrea Dworkin’s brilliant and deranged *Woman Hating: A Radical Look at Sexuality*. E. P. Dutton Publishers, 1974.
- ix A number of male authors have made the case that the history of humanity, perhaps particularly of western societies, demonstrates the male imperative to protect women and children through male sacrifice. Tim Goldich makes a strong case for male sacrifice as a cultural norm in his *Loving Men, Respecting Women: The Future of Gender Politics* (2011). Herbert Purdy has argued in *Their Angry Creed: The Shocking History of Feminism and How it is Destroying Our Way of Life* (2016) that “Social leadership by men was a tacit, natural development, born of aeons of natural selection for survival that morphed into men becoming the law-making, law-enforcing agents within developing nations, which not only had to be protected from outside attack, but often from power struggles within” (92). The protection of women and children was a key objective, and traditional patriarchal societies, far from being woman-hating, were (and remain) focused on the well-being and safety of women. David Shackleton

- argues in *The Hand that Rocks the World: An Inquiry into Truth, Power, and Gender* (2015) that men's physical power has been consistently balanced by women's significant moral power, the power to shame and influence men.
- x A startling example of feminist indifference to male troubles is exemplified in feminist Jane Caro's dismissal of recent concerns about boys falling behind in school (fully documented in Christina Hoff Sommers' must-read *The War on Boys*). According to Caro, boys don't bother to work hard in school because they know they don't need to; the world outside the classroom is biased in their favor. See "How to help boys do better at school. Stop giving them a leg-up in the outside world." *Life & Style* 15 August 2016. <http://www.stuff.co.nz/life-style/life/83181546/How-to-help-boys-do-better-at-school-Stop-giving-them-a-leg-up-in-the-outside-world>
- xi Journalist Rose Hackman, who was surprised that every time she wrote about gender issues, men wrote to say that they felt "wronged—silenced, even," devoted an (astoundingly under-researched) article to exploring men's experiences in a feminist culture, concluding that most of what felt like disadvantage was merely the discomfort of having one's "sense of entitlement" removed. Get over it, men, was the clear message. See Rose Hackman, "I didn't choose to be straight, white, and male': Are modern men the suffering sex?" *The Guardian* 5 September 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/05/straight-while-men-suffering-sex-feminism>
- xii For an excellent overview of male confusion and withdrawal—and their negative impact on women—see Milo Yiannopoulos's "The Sexodus, Part 1: The Men Giving Up on Women and Checking Out of Society." *Breitbart* 4 December 2014. <http://www.breitbart.com/london/2014/12/04/the-sexodus-part-1-the-men-giving-up-on-women-and-checking-out-of-society/>; and Milo Yiannopoulos's "The Sexodus, Part 2: Dishonest Feminist Panics Leave Male Sexuality in Crisis." *Breitbart* 9 December 2014. <http://www.breitbart.com/london/2014/12/09/the-sexodus-part-2-dishonest-feminist-panics-leave-male-sexuality-in-crisis/>
- xiii A 2013 study by two economists at MIT found that far fewer men are pursuing higher education than women: women born after 1975 are "roughly 17% more likely than their male counterparts to attend college and nearly 23% more likely to complete a four year degree." Because education is intimately related to lifetime income and social status, the prospects for men—and particularly for their sons, as the study explores, because boys in single-mother households are more negatively affected than girls—are bleak: "Recent cohorts of males are likely to face diminished employment and earnings opportunities and other attendant maladies, including poor health, higher probability of incarceration, and generally lower life satisfaction" (7). Such results are not unique to America, the authors indicate. See David Autor and Melanie Wasserman, "Wayward Sons: The Emerging Gender Gap in Labor Markets and Education." *Third Way*. 20 March 2013. <http://economics.mit.edu/files/8754>. Accessed 15 February 2017.
- xiv The idea that masculinity is "toxic" or in some other sense harmful and pathological has now become widespread. Many colleges and universities in North America offer programs for young men to unlearn or re-think their deformed humanity. For an overview of such programs, see Lily Dane, "Look out, Men: Your Toxic Masculinity Is Now the Focus of Progressive Wrath." *The Daily Sheeple* 18 January 2017. http://www.thedailysheeple.com/look-out-men-your-toxic-masculinity-is-now-the-focus-of-progressive-wrath_012017. The University of Regina, which hosts a Man Up Against Violence program to encourage men to take responsibility for ending violence against women, recently offered a "Masculinity Confession Booth" in March of 2017. It encouraged both men and women to fess up to the manner in which they had reinforced what is called "hypermasculinity": "We have all reinforced hypermasculinity one way or another regardless of our gender!! ...Come and share your sins so we can begin to discuss how to identify and change our ways !!!" For the most explicit delineation of masculinity as a form of sickness, see the Institute for the Prevention and Treatment of Mascupathy. <https://mascupathy.org/what-is-mascupathy/>
- xv For an overview of the anger stirred by my anti-feminist talk at Queen's University in 2014, see "Institutions of Higher Indoctrination," *Studio Brule*, 21 October 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-jEQYHAFfjg>
- xvi Two feminist activists argued on Steve Paikin's TV Ontario show "The Agenda" that protestors had the right to shut down my talk at the University of Ottawa because it was anti-feminist. "The Agenda," 13 May 2014. <http://tvo.org/video/programs/the-agenda-with-steve-paikin/free-speech-at-what-cost>
- xvii The website SAVE (Stop Abusive and Violent Environments) provides a voluminous compendium of fact-based articles documenting the lack of due process and the denial of the presumption of innocence for young men accused of sexual misconduct on university campuses across North America. For a good overview of the problem that now confronts those who care about equality before the law, see Sonja Sasser's "The War Our Sons (and Daughters) Now Face on College Campuses." *Politichicks* 3 February 2017. <http://politichicks.com/2017/02/war->

- [sons-daughters-now-face-college-campuses/](#). See also an editorial by KC Johnson and Stuart Taylor, “Students Accused of Campus Sexual Assault Are now Guilty until Proved Innocent.” *Los Angeles Times* 3 March 2017. <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-johnson-taylor-campus-sexual-assault-20170303-story.html>
- xviii Some men are even willing to insist that women have a *right* to hate men. See Anthony J. Williams’s blog post, “Women have a right to hate men.” <https://medium.com/@anthoknees/women-have-a-right-to-hate-men-df41b4de3842#txs66147k>
- xix Michael Kimmel has made a career belittling men who object to feminist theory and arguing for their need to reform according to feminist dictates. See Michael Kimmel, *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men*. New York: HarperCollins, 2009.

AUTHOR PROFILE



Janice Fiamengo, creator of the *Fiamengo File* YouTube series at Studio Brulé, is a writer, professor of English, and advocate for men’s issues. She teaches literature at the University of Ottawa and is the author of *The Woman’s Page* (2007), a study of early Canadian female journalists, as well as of numerous periodical essays and edited books. She has also published online articles criticizing feminism and political correctness in journals such as *PJ Media* and *Front Page Magazine*. She lives in the Thousand Islands region of Ontario with her husband, poet and songwriter David Solway.

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EXISTENTIAL THERAPY (DASEINSTHERAPY): A THERAPEUTIC RESPONSE WITH MALES TRAUMATISED BY INTIMATE PARTNER OR FAMILY VIOLENCE ¹

Miles Groth



ABSTRACT

The author discusses working from an existential perspective with individuals traumatized by aggression in intimate partner relationships and family settings. He poses three questions: What do clients from widely different Western populations who have been harmed emotionally in ways that lead them to seek outside help require from clinical psychologists and other mental health practitioners, especially with a view to the prevention of further aggression in their lives? What are the features of a modality of psychotherapy that is effective with this diverse population? What is therapeutic in relationships with such individuals that leads to an abatement of aggression in their lives?

Keywords: psychotherapy, existential therapy, male studies, men in therapy, daseinstherapy

¹ Paper presented at the First German Congress on Prevention of Partner and Family Violence, Goethe University, Frankfurt, April 15, 2018.

My topic this morning is how therapists may best work with an individual who has experienced aggression directed toward the person or against others and has sought counsel because of its effects on the individual's emotional life. In keeping with the international context of this conference, I ask whether a therapeutic approach can be identified that is applicable with such adults across nationalities and cultures and is effective regardless of the individual's sex and sociocultural status. I will suggest that an existential approach can meet the challenge.

I. First, some necessarily brief and therefore incomplete clarifications regarding a number of concepts are in order. I want to say a bit about trauma, violence, aggression, existence, and therapy.

As we have heard this weekend, recent research (see the Appendix below) is quite clear that when there is aggression in intimate partner relationships, in every case both individuals involved are at the very least emotionally harmed in some way whether or not this is noticed initially or acknowledged by both individuals. Considered psychodynamically, interpersonal aggression is necessarily dyadic.

We now know that men as often as women are the object of such emotionally damaging behavior. However, men are much less likely to report such experiences to friends or medical and criminal justice personnel. When there is physical damage and a man requires emergency room care, for example, he is likely to attribute his injuries to an accident. When harmed emotionally, men commonly suppress reactions other than secondary reactive anger, which often incites further aggressiveness. A man who appears in the office of a psychiatrist, social worker or clinical psychologist to discuss what has happened to him is still rare.

The consequences of such experiences—especially feelings of fear and helplessness—often add up to the symptoms of what since about 1980 psychiatry has referred to as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a condition first identified as “shell shock” in men who had been overwhelmed by the conditions of combat during World War One. Later (c. 1985), the disorder was more famously associated with adult women who reported that during early childhood they had experienced violent relationships with older males, often their fathers. PTSD was also more widely diagnosed in both male and female adults who as children had experienced multiple serial acts of aggression at home or in the community.

Another finding mentioned this weekend is that work with individuals who have experienced intimate partner or familial aggression has had in general limited therapeutic effectiveness especially in preventing further experiences of aggression from occurring. This disheartening admission by clinicians is, of course, one reason for our conference. My contribution is meant to suggest one way to improve the record of psychotherapeutic work with the population that concerns us.

So much by way of a brief and unfairly simplistic look back at some of the findings we have heard about so far at this congress and elsewhere in reports of research on our theme.

II. As further context for my remarks, I would like to note a few ideas that have guided my thinking on our topic. *First*, there is the obvious fact that responses to experiences of aggression observed, endured or perpetrated vary significantly depending on the person's sex and age, and the broader cultural ethos in which the individual exists. Are there principles of psychological treatment that can transcend these differences?

Second, we should recall that what is judged to be "objectively" violent or aggressive by an outside observer may be registered by the person subjected to it as a very different experience, both in kind and degree. For example, an individual who has since early childhood been exposed to chronic mishandling—ranging from persistent yelling and humiliations to excessively harsh "disciplinary" punishments—may as an adolescent or adult barely respond to an instance of name-calling or shoving, which to someone relatively "innocent" of aggression is perceived as shockingly violent. An individual who has rarely or never been exposed to interpersonal aggression while growing up might be profoundly affected by observing or experiencing a single slap or harsh name called out at a person, especially when delivered by someone with whom the person harmed is on intimate terms in what heretofore had been a mild, loving relationship.

These problems of *interpersonal perception* between individuals who are at different levels of maturity, socialization, acculturation, and power make our topic extremely complex. As you will see, they are especially relevant for how a patient in counseling or psychotherapy responds to the therapist's words. I should add that the dynamics of interpersonal perception discussed with notable insight by the Scottish psychiatrist R.D. Laing beginning in the 1950s as part of his social phenomenology has been very influential on my own thinking about therapy.

III. I move on now to a few words about basic concepts. Our discussions this weekend began with the assumption that certain experiences are *traumatic*; namely, those perceived to be violent or aggressive or both. Therefore a few words about the meaning of *trauma* are in order.

As a young therapist, I asked one of my earliest mentors—a seasoned psychiatrist and psychoanalyst—what he considered to be the most important single principle to keep in mind when working with people in psychoanalytic psychotherapy. It was the sort of question a naïve beginner asks.

I expected to hear something like “point of arrested development” or “degree of regression” or “extent of dissociation.” To my surprise, he said *the extent of perceived trauma the individual has endured—which, he added, we nearly always underestimate*. I thought I would then hear as an example of it something like sexual aggression or other interpersonal violence. The example he gave, however, was the experience of the death of a teenage boy’s younger brother.

Our cases regularly involve interactions between people that are florid, noisy, and chaotic. On the other hand, as in my mentor’s example, being “abandoned” by a loved sibling can be as traumatizing as a blow to the body that was a deliberate expression of hostility, rage, or anger. It is always necessary to understand aggression from the perspective of *perceived* aggression, since that is what counts as traumatic for a person.

In general, as we know, what is traumatizing renders the individual temporarily overwhelmed by the physiological responses of defensive arousal and the numbing emotional feeling of being unable to make sense of what has happened and to respond to it adequately. “It does not compute.” Traumatized, one may become agitated or immobile in the stillness of incapability. The response to an event that is traumatizing may be a loud scream and crying. Or it may be stunned silence.

The well-known tardive appearance of fear and anxiety in the scenario of cases of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder come to mind here. After initial emotional and cognitive freezing, a response finally occurs, perhaps days, months, or even years after exposure to traumatizing events. Such initial non-responsiveness may be of special importance among males, who from boyhood on are socialized to not express emotions, whether they are pleasant or painful. For boys, often the only socially approved emotional reaction is anger and that may be forbidden by

threats of further aggressiveness in the form of retributive punishments by parents or other elders. Years later, however, the expression of anger may finally be disinhibited and with damaging (including self-damaging) results in sudden, unanticipated outbursts of aggressiveness.

Next, it is important to clarify three related concepts before thinking about our work with individuals who have experienced *interpersonal transactions* that are traumatizing: these are *hostility*, *aggression*, and *violence*. The phenomena are often not carefully enough distinguished, but to do so is important for our consideration of therapeutic work.

First, *hostility*. Hostility is a disturbance of affect that may or may not lead to its expression in words or other acts. Thoughts about revenge and plans to implement impulses to strike out often accompany or immediately follow feelings of hostility, but such thoughts and impulses and the hostility that engendered them may be masked by a facial expression and overall comportment that suggest composure, even calm. “Inside,” however, the hostility is livid and may move on to rage. Yet neither the hostility nor the rage may be externalized.

Next, *violence* and *aggression*. *Violence* is behavior involving physical force intended to damage the object toward which it is directed and perhaps even to kill it if the object is a living being. There is violence in the slaughtering of animals that will be eaten and in some sports, and there is often violence when in the interests of survival one instinctively tries to ward off or escape from a perceived attack on one’s body or person. There is violence when two people argue or come to blows. But now comes the crucial distinction.

In interpersonal transactions we must distinguish between violence from *aggression*, which is always affectively motivated. The hunter does not hate the deer he shoots to procure venison for the dinner table. He feels no hostility toward the animal before going on the hunt. The football player or boxer does not hate his opponent on the field or in the ring. Neither are motivated by hostility. Violence does not imply aggression, but the person who lashes out at another, screaming at or striking the other person, is inevitably motivated by hostility, perhaps even by rage.

But now consider the following example. Walking along a crowded Manhattan sidewalk, I once saw an adult woman push a small male child off the sidewalk into the space between two

parked cars. My response was powerful. I felt shocked by the adult's behavior and compassion for the child. Everything changed, however, when I realized that the woman had seen a runaway vendor cart barreling down the sidewalk heading toward the child whose back was turned to it. The little boy was also shocked by his mother's surprising, sudden violent gesture and stood there between the parked cars crying—until his mother went to him after the cart had passed and crashed into a parked car several yards away.

The adult's shove had saved the child from being struck by the cart and likely sustaining serious injury. She hugged him profusely, explained what had happened and what could have happened, and comforted the boy. That took some doing. We may wonder how well he understood the gesture or his mother's explanation of it.

By now she, too, was crying. She was a hero, not an aggressor. Her behavior had been violent but not aggressive.

This is important when considering interpersonal aggression. In fact, I wonder whether we should in general speak of intimate partner aggression or familial aggression instead of intimate partner violence, since what we are talking about is always motivated by disturbed affect.

I have not forgotten the Dollard-Miller model of aggression—that aggression is caused by frustration—and I think it is worth considering. I only want to establish that interpersonal aggression is always motivated by negative affect—but perhaps instead the impatience consequent to frustration.

IV. Next, I want to say something about *therapy* in general and what is *therapeutic*. This will lead me to comment on the notion of *existence*.

What do we intend to accomplish when we sit down with someone in the intimate setting of the consulting room? My concern is that most psychotherapists implicitly think of the other as an object—a *what*, whether it be (1) an ego at odds with its id, conscience, and the outside world; or (2) a thinking critic of his or her own thoughts; or (3) a machine-like emitter of chunks of behavior (operants) that may be ignored, rewarded or punished by others in the interpersonal environment; or, finally, (4) a brain that somehow “has” feelings and motives and “talks” to itself between its hemispheres.

I prefer to think in terms of the uniquely human being, the person who exists, a *who*. This is the only being that exists, not a being that in any sense ever *is* something fixed once and for all in its features—a *what*. Here we are in the world of existence or what has been famously termed *Da-sein* by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger.

You now see why I call the approach I take in therapy *existential*. It is directed at the existence, the *Da-sein* of the other.²

The existential therapeutic stance does not concern itself with the nationality, language spoken, class, level of education, sex, or gender of the other. It can be applied in cases of experienced interpersonal aggression here in Germany, in Canada, or the States. Recent reports of clinical psychologists working in China with whom I am acquainted suggest that the broadly humanistic and existential-phenomenological approach of which existential therapy is the paradigm is also effective in “non-Western” cultures. In fact, its popularity there is extraordinary.

As you have guessed, I take a certain position with respect to the venerable psychodynamic and cognitive-behavioral approaches so well known and widely employed in contemporary counseling and psychotherapy. Here I can only summarize the basics of existential therapy and identify what I believe is therapeutic about it, but without being critical of those other perspectives. Given what we have heard about the limited degree of effectiveness of *psychotherapeutic* interventions with individuals who have experienced traumatizing aggression in intimate relationships, the existential view I take will, I hope, be welcomed in our discussion without necessarily rejecting and discarding other approaches.

It is often said that people come to therapy because *they want to change or to be changed*. It is said by some that understanding one’s past is the best means for effecting change in the present and preparing one for a better future—a future, for example, without aggression. Alas, no life will be free of violence of various kinds. Others, in the tradition of cognitive-behavioral therapy, broadly conceived but especially in the modality known as rational-emotive behavior therapy (REBT), suggest that we only need to think differently than we do about what is

² Currently, I prefer the term *daseinstherapy* to term existential therapy.

important to us and reframe our thoughts in order to neutralize the effects of the past experiences and prevent them from being repeated in the future.

I take a different view about what motivates a person to consult a therapist. It seems to me that if *acting on one's own* a person seeks what the genuine therapist can provide, it is because *one's existence has changed*. One's world has changed. In everyday terms, we say one's whole "life" and every aspect of it has changed, even though one may not be consciously aware *that* something has changed. There is only a sense of uncanniness. Or one may know *that* something has changed but not know just *what the "that" is*. "Something feels different" but just what that means is unclear. People seek therapy, not to change but because one's world has changed.

The existential therapist does not set out to "fix" or other alter or change the other.

What distinguishes existential therapy from other forms of *psychotherapy* is that it is *non-interventional* and must be experienced as such by the other who has come to consult with us. The goal of existential therapy is *to provide an interpersonal situation in which the other is able to recover his present (Gegenwart)*. That such provision is perceived as non-interventional turns out to be crucial when working with individuals who have experienced interpersonal aggression, especially males. Medical treatment, giving advice or information, retraining or imposing disciplines, offering custodial care, inspiration or exhortation—all of these, and the traditional forms of psychotherapy are *interventional*.

If this sounds odd to you and you are saying to yourself, "But we must *do* something, we must step in," I reply: (a) As physicians and other healthcare providers we are obligated to intervene when someone is agitated, confused and disoriented, and we may elect to chemically quiet his nervous system until and so that he can reflect on his existence. (b) As a culture we must authorize certain people to step in and stop patterns of interpersonal aggression between men and women, parents and children when they are occurring. For this purpose, we have police. (c) Beyond that, we must also attempt to educate or re-educate adults who are aggressive. For this we have special schools and rehabilitation centers. (d) As social workers, we must inform and assist relatively helpless, uninformed or incapable people negotiate the bewilderingly complex system of mental healthcare institutions. Finally, (e) as teachers we must embody certain values of civility and model rationality.

However, as therapists working with men and women who have been subjected to aggressive acts or who have carried them out against others, our goal is not to effect change, but only to acknowledge that it has taken place and to make way for the other to bring about existential orientation in his or her world.

Existential therapy is offered precisely without intervening in the life of the other. A certain kind of *Fürsorge* (solicitude or concern) is shown—what Heidegger termed *vorausspringende Fürsorge*—namely, concern for the other’s existence that steps aside and makes way for the recovery of the other’s *present*. By contrast there is the intervening, *einspringende Fürsorge* of medical and social social practices, schooling, and active support of the kinds I’ve mentioned.³

To be clear, since this often comes up in discussions of existential therapy, to attempt to *be* nothing to the other does not mean *doing nothing*. The effort to make way (*vorausspringen*) requires continually monitoring when the other entreats us to help solve a problem, advise, or reconstruct a past and plan for a future. To abstain from the other’s ordinary everyday desire for us to step in (*einspringen*) and modulate his temporal orientation for him is hard psychological work for the therapist.

We will not always be successful in staying out of the way of the other’s recovery of his or her present, but this should not prevent us from continuing to pursue our goal: permitting a situation and conditions to be maintained for the brief span of the therapeutic hour in which recovering one’s present is the work to be done by the other sitting across from us. We remain aware that the other must leave us and return to the real world where his existence does not first matter. This requires ending our meeting. Is this a form of intervention, after all? I leave this open as an important question for discussion.

³ Here I would invite the interested listener to have a look at my book *After Psychotherapy* (New York: ENI Press, 2016) and a pair of articles “The Return of the Therapeut. The Genuine Psychotherapist,” in the *International Journal of Psychotherapy* **18**(1), 2014, pp. 5-18, and **18**(2), 2014, pp. 5-20.

V. This is especially important for the group we are concerned with this weekend. Paradoxically, with someone whose symptomatology has been determined by traumatizing experiences of interpersonal aggression, potentially any intervention will likely be experienced (consciously or unconsciously) as aggressive. This is why, I believe, medical treatment—and here I refer especially to psychiatry—as well as social work and the modalities of psychotherapy, which are based on the medical model, have not been effective in working with individuals traumatized by aggression.

In every intervention something literally *comes between* the one providing treatment and the other, between an agent and a patient. By contrast, the *sine qua non* of a genuinely therapeutic alliance from the existential perspective is a concern and intimacy that precludes anything getting in the way of contact between the two existing human beings.

The nationality, language spoken, cultural heritage, race, ethnicity, age, sex, gender or political position of the therapist is seen to be irrelevant to the therapeutic purpose if one takes an existential approach since existence is the *possibility* for any identity, whether it be established as a socioeconomic, religious, gendered, or otherwise cultural.

In attempting to establish a therapeutic alliance, every psychotherapist tries to be even, fair and kind, but that is not enough when the other has been sensitized (as allergists say) to the emotional toxins that produced the original traumatic response. A concerted effort to *not intervene* is the most promising way to respectfully approach the other's privacy and allow that unique relationship we term therapeutic to form.

To be nothing to the other is the “technique” of the existential therapist. *To be a therapist* to the other is, alas, unavoidable by definition, but to strive to *not* be anything else to him is a goal that we can pursue. Clearly, the physical and personal realities of the therapist, who is after all a living, breathing person with physical features immediately discernible to the other sitting across from him cannot be eliminated. On the other hand, it is possible for the other to effect what the phenomenologists terms an *epoché* (a temporary suspension of belief) with respect to those realities. This is another element of existential “technique.”

Explaining just how this and our *being nothing to the other* are accomplished exceeds the scope of my presentation. It will have been enough to suggest this morning that existential therapy is, I believe, the indicated modality in working with individuals whose presenting complaint is a history of perceived aggression. Following two more comments on classical psychoanalysis and Gestalt therapy, I will explain why.

Classical psychoanalysis, which positions the analyst out of sight of the analysis and in a situation where only two disembodied voices can be heard, one of them saying little or nothing, was perhaps most promising among the early psychotherapies as an existential therapy. Communication between the not consciously known of one person and the not consciously known of another is enhanced by hiding the physical realities of the analyst—appearance, including gender and ethnicity, age and habits of self-presentation—and even minimizing vocal utterances. But even here at least one intervention is always required (apart from demanding a fee) and that is, of course, invoking the seemingly harmless fundamental rule—to say anything that comes to mind—which no matter how gently put nevertheless remains an injunction and therefore an intervention, albeit a much much less harsh one than the “Think straight, buddy!” of rational-emotive behavior therapy. And given the inevitability of resistance, in practice it turns out that the psychoanalytic injunction must be urged again and again on the analysand.

A few words about Gestalt therapy may be in order since it appears to have a great deal in common with the approach I am describing and advocating. As I understand it, drawing attention to the immediate shared situation and as therapist immersing oneself in it with the patient is a principal therapeutic goal of Gestalt practice. Gestalt therapists aim to expose and expand the immediate perceptual experience of the patient, share it and become involved in it. In order to do so however, the Gestalt therapist must intervene. The famous interaction between “Gloria” and Fritz Perls of *early* Gestalt therapy fame has merely been seen by nearly every psychotherapist who wants to understand the modality. Ultimately concerned with drawing the patient closer, Perls first forcefully encounters her. I should add that Gestalt therapy has developed in many ways since Fritz (who was originally trained as a psychoanalyst), especially thanks to the work of his wife, Laura. The approach remains interventional, however. Like all the others, if entering the shared field of “the moment” is the Gestalt therapist’s goal, the aim of existential therapy is to permit the other access to his or her own present but not to somehow

share in it.

VI. Now permit me to express myself more carefully on why this approach works especially well with individuals whose most intimate relationships have been chronically marked and marred by aggression the point is that they will be especially sensitive to what is perceived to be any intrusion, invasion, or penetration of their world—whether we conceptualize this world as the body’s social space or the intrapsychic space of the self.

Spoken words, which can affect even the most self-assured of us when harshly uttered by someone whom we have respected, admired or entrusted with our well-being, are registered if at all only with great caution by those who in the past have been frequently humiliated, even punished with words as well as blows. The words of even the most well-meaning, soft-spoken physician, social worker, or psychotherapist are easily misconstrued as intending harm and are therefore deflected by the selective inattention of the patient. Words by default are perceived as admonishment, imperatives representing the peremptory redirection of one’s behavior by the therapist.

The therapist must take an approach that does not lock the other in a bond, even one that is sincerely intended to be nonconstrictive. Such *bonds* are easily experienced as *binds* by the group of patients we are considering.

Knowing that no matter how well-meaning or gently offered in dulcet tones or prefaced by disclaimers a verbal intervention may be, we must realize how easily it may be taken as *edging* against the other’s somatic and emotional boundaries, the physical and emotional surfaces of the person’s world, his or her skin or that membrane of sensibility we call the self.

Any behavior perceived as an intervention, even if honestly intended to be therapeutic, implies a power differential. We must not forget that all of our patients have been in some sense overpowered.

Finally, let us consider the therapist’s own understanding of aggression, including experiences of it in his own life.

It is sometimes claimed that individuals who have themselves experienced a certain problem such as addiction to substances like tobacco, alcohol or other drugs, and have

“overcome” the addiction, have been prepared by their life experiences for working with people currently in bondage to one of those substances. Similarly, the experience of having “survived” sexual abuse and being motivated to help others learn how to cope with its traumatic effects and no longer feel the stress that reliving it retrospectively produces, is sometimes said to have prepared someone to be a counselor or therapist who specializes in working with those who are experiencing the repercussions of interpersonal aggression, sexual or otherwise. The idea is that reliving past traumata in the presence of someone who has “been there” but has transcended its effects will be therapeutic. He made it; so can I.

I doubt, however, that this makes sense—and the research once again suggests that such individuals have had as little success as psychotherapists of whatever modality, and for this reason. The survivor as therapist will have had a strong reaction to aggression and will want an end to it in the life of the client he sits with. But being a survivor is being something to the other and this is precisely what the therapist who takes an existential approach wants to avoid. Obviously, his urgings will be experienced as interventions.

If the existential approach suggested here is viable, it works because the practitioner assiduously attempts to abstain from advocating for a way of life for the other, knowing that one’s only “job” is to provide a situation in which a way is made for the other to recover and resume his or her present. Precisely *not* addressing as such the aggressions purported or known to have been experienced is the *desideratum*. What has in fact happened is of great importance to the physician or policemen, but as every therapist knows only the psychological reality of the other matters, no matter what a surveillance camera may have recorded or eye witnesses may report.

Stepping in (intervening), is yet one more stepping on the present of the other, the present that has been abandoned and from which the other has taken refuge in a recollected past or an imagined future. To *not* intervene in a life that has been filled with aggressive “interventions” therefore holds the most promise therapeutically for preventing them in the future. There *can* be a general therapeutic response to interpersonal aggression with intimates that has been traumatizing.

APPENDIX: SUMMARY OF RESEARCH PRESENTED

Highlights of research presented at the conference may be summarized as follows. Intimate partner violence is prevalent throughout the Western world. Despite attention to the issue and substantial research from a variety of perspectives, prevention and treatment efforts have limited effectiveness. Our science of what contributes to partner violence needs to more carefully explicate mechanisms to lay the ground work for more impactful interventions. Mounting evidence suggests that dyadic processes lead to aggression. Both partners in a relationship contribute risk and protective factors. The ways in which those men and women contribute to aggression are more similar than different.

Research from the USA since the 1970s has shown that men and women perpetrate aggression against one another at roughly similar rates, even though women are more often physically injured as a result of the aggression. Male victims of partner aggression must overcome internal barriers such as shame and fear in order to reach out for help.

Current research supports that a significant number of men experience violence from a partner but few studies have explored men's victimization experiences of both aggression and control.

Men experience significant verbal and physical aggression as well as control, manipulation and psychological abuse. They report facing significant barriers in help-seeking and often have not told anyone about their abusive experiences.

Anyone can become the target of aggression, but aggression is not experienced uniformly in any given population. Different forms of aggression (such as partner aggression, aggression against children, sexual aggression, youth aggression including bullying) cumulate in high-risk populations and communities and show common risk and protection factors with respect to both victimization and use of violence. Data from monitoring the German population's health points to the key significance of structural and functional family risk scenarios in the origins and prevention of various forms of aggression as well as the transgenerational propagation of violence.

Connections between experiencing traumatizing events, the diagnosis of PTSD, and interpersonal aggression have been identified. Studies have explored (1) PTSD among female survivors of family violence, (2) the association between combat exposure, PTSD, and the occurrence of aggression among male veterans in their families, and (3) the association between experiencing traumatic events as children, PTSD, and males' current use of aggression in their families.

The work of the father of the field of family aggression research, Murray A. Straus, PhD, must be recalled. He studied family violence, developed the *Conflict Tactics Scales*, and mentored thousands of

students and colleagues. Straus was a courageous scholar who brought the issue of family violence to public attention and tackled controversial issues. His work on gender symmetry in partner violence perpetration and victimization prompted death threats and calls to ban his work. He did not waiver in his commitment to studying and raising awareness about family violence.

A simple and effective way to identify violent couple types has been worked out. The typology developed by the late Murray Straus is basic. This typology differentiates man-only, woman-only, and both-partner violent couples. Studies of violent couple type rates and differences have been carried out. The theoretical and practical implications of implementing these types in professionals' treatment of partner violence are far-reaching. Such implementation can improve interventions and mediate commonly held ideological, theoretical and therapeutic concepts.

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THE SOCIAL VACUUM & THE LOSS OF SOLIDARITY FOR VETERANS EXPERIENCED IN CIVILIAN REINTEGRATION

Gary Senecal, MaryCatherine McDonald,

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ABSTRACT

The difficulties many veterans experience upon reintegration into civilian society have been thoroughly documented over the last fifteen years. Though traditional diagnosis such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are undoubtedly a contributing factor to these difficulties, the data show that American soldiers struggle to reintegrate at a much higher rate than soldiers from other nations. Limiting the concept of these difficulties so narrowly on trauma exposure is too narrow. In this research, 25 veterans were interviewed and described their experience of transition from military life to a civilian career. The participants' responses revealed that there was a significant social dimension to the struggles faced upon leaving their military careers and culture. Among these, the loss of solidarity and a perceived sense of trust and unity among their civilian peers was at the epicenter of participants' struggles in their civilian lives.

Keywords: veteran reintegration, isolation, loss of solidarity, loss of structure, career transition

INTRODUCTION

Many veterans face a serious void in their life upon leaving active duty or deployment. Specifically, they often struggle with the difficulty of replicating the types of relationships they forged with members of their platoon when moving into a civilian career (Ahern, Worthen, Masters, Lippman, Ozer, & Moos, 2015; Junger, 2010; Kukla, Rattray, & Sayers, 2015; Browning, 2015; Nelson Goff, Crow, Reisbig, Hamilton, 2007; Friedman, 2005; Demers, 2011; Caddick, Phoenix, & Smith, 2015; Monson, Taft, & Fredman, 2009; Bowling & Sherman, 2008). Though these struggles are often not directly connected to traditional conceptualizations of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), symptoms and struggles may arise for soldiers that are consistent with the range of symptoms often tied to PTSD.

The etiology, course, and presence of PTSD in the DSM-V is classified as a disorder that occurs when a person is a victim of or spectator to a traumatic event (i.e., unexpected death, violence, brutality, aggression, sexual assault, natural disaster, car accident, etc.). In order to be diagnosed with PTSD, a patient has to manifest a series of symptoms from each of the four clusters specified in the DSM, including intrusion, avoidance, negative alterations in cognitions and mood, and alterations in arousal and reactivity. These symptoms also must be measured relative to the duration of these symptoms in arousal and reactivity (DSM-V, 2013). Ultimately, when an individual is diagnosed with PTSD, he or she is presumed to be the witness of an unexpected, tragic, life-threatening, or shocking event. The experience of such an event is what gives rise to some range of these physiological, psychological, and somatic symptoms.

PTSD is the most common diagnosis for soldiers who experience symptoms and struggles upon reintegrating into civilian life. However, what is often less accounted for in the conceptualization of these symptoms is the possibility that a veteran is experiencing symptoms related to PTSD but not as a result of standing witness to a traumatic event. In this research project, we set out to test for a larger range of difficulty regarding social reintegration issues for returning veterans. Beyond PTSD and the experience of standing witness to unexpected trauma in war, there are other social and motivational struggles the reintegrating soldier may face when returning from active duty. Among these, we will discuss the effect that connection to one's former platoon members would have on the veteran if he or she were unable to recreate those otherwise strong bonds of solidarity with their current coworkers. In many ways, this factor

differs significantly from the classical conceptualization of PTSD as it currently stands. Ultimately, we argue that the current concept of struggles and symptoms soldiers may face when reintegrating into civilian life should look beyond PTSD and take seriously the social etiology of these symptoms for soldiers who return to civilian society. We argue that the social and, consequently, emotional gap between military and civilian life and culture can account for a significant portion of the struggles soldiers face after leaving an active duty setting.

DIFFICULTY REPLICATING RELATIONSHIPS

A large portion of the existent research has attested to the potency of social support systems and the role they can play in insulating soldiers from developing symptoms related to PTSD upon returning from deployment (Brewin, Andrews, & Valentine, 2000; Pietrzak, Johnson, Goldstien, Malley, & Southwick, 2009; Westwood, McLean, Cave, Borgen, & Slakov, 2010). Ahern, et al. (2015) offer research that shows three major themes relevant to the social reintegration experience of veterans into civilian life. First, soldiers in this study largely described how many veterans viewed the military environment as a “family” that would sacrifice for them and provide for stability. Second, many veterans felt that their relationships in the civilian world could not match the level of connection they felt to former military members. Finally, veterans found themselves trying to seek out structures of support to aid their civilian life, relational, and work experiences. Demers (2011) offers a multifactorial analysis that presents a positive correlation between a sense of alienation for veterans that results in an identity crisis. According to Demers, this alienation and identity crisis that soldiers tend to experience a sense of being stuck in a social and emotional purgatory between military and civilian culture. Soldiers who have left active duty are no longer a part of military culture and yet, there may still be a serious relational void between the reintegrating soldier and his or her friends and family. It is possible that this relational void leads to a crisis of identity for the newly detached soldier. According to Demers, there is an exigent need for social support groups for veterans. Furthermore, Demers suggests there is a need to raise the cultural competence of clinicians, social workers, and college counselors regarding education of and exposure to the military and military culture.

Kukla, Rattray, and Salyers (2015) performed research on veterans and found that workplace reintegration is a significant factor in predicting the overall health and reintegration of the soldier. Among the factors that have an impact on workplace reintegration, veterans who

experienced combat had a significantly more difficult time in their reintegration experience. Participants' self-concept of identifying as a veteran was more severe after deployment effecting a difficulty engaging socially with civilian coworkers, managers, and peers. Other research has yielded similar findings displaying the importance of comradeship for veterans who are processing the complexities of war (Schok et al, 2010).

Roberts Browning (2015) provides research examining the reintegration experience of active duty soldiers and veterans reintegrating on college campuses. It was found that the military-friendly campuses that provided such things as veteran's lounges, priority registration, and credit for courses completed during active duty offered a strong social support structure for veterans returning home. The majority of participants on military-friendly colleges reported that they believed they would succeed in this atmosphere and that they were able to retain high levels of camaraderie with other veterans on these campuses.

Collins (1998) discusses the value distinctions between military and civilian society. This distance is termed as a "civil-military cultural gap" and has been exacerbated by the United States largely holding an all-volunteer army for the last 40 years. The result is that former military are less likely than ever to have contact with other former military members when they reintegrate into American society. Hunt and Robbins (2001) report on findings of World War II veterans who experienced social support from their community, family, workplace, and peers. This perception of solidarity became an insulating factor for soldiers and a lifelong coping strategy for soldiers still processing the events of war. Demers (2014) piggybacks on this concept, expressing how identity is deeply linked to one's sense of community and that the growing gap between military and civilian culture has led to a form of identity crisis within the community for the reintegrating veteran. Greden et al. (2010) and Jain et al. (2012) report that "buddy programs" can have a significant effect on improving health outcomes for veterans who have been diagnosed with and are being treated for PTSD. In short, research continues to show that veterans too often report a sense of social isolation that may not only be tied back to the symptoms of PTSD, but also a "cultural gap" between military and civilian worlds (Hoffman et al., 2003; Rahbeck-Clemmensen et al., 2012).

FAMILIAL DIFFICULTIES

Moving further into the nuances of these relational difficulties, familial struggles are at the core of this social examination of veteran reintegration. Goff, Crow, Reisbig, and Hamilton (2007) examine 45 male OIF and OEF soldiers and the level of marital satisfaction upon returning from deployment. The study found that sexual, dissociative, and sleep problems all had a strong positive correlation with marital difficulties upon returning from combat. Though a significant number of studies have found this range of symptoms present for soldiers upon reintegration (Ishøy et al., 2001; Jones et al., 2003; Simmons, Macanochie, & Doyle, 2004), this study reveals how, more specifically, this range of symptoms is likely tied to relational dissatisfaction in spouses upon reintegrating into civilian life. The authors suggest that the presence of these specific difficulties made it more challenging for soldiers to be adequately available emotionally for their partners upon returning from deployment.

METHODS

For this study, researchers conducted twenty-five semi-structured interviews with former military veterans. Participants found our study through advertisements that were placed online as well as in the communities where we reside in Massachusetts and Virginia. We also visited homeless shelters for veterans to solicit participants.

A large majority of our sample had deployed, however, we included participants who did not deploy because we recognize that reintegration to civilian life can be a challenge for those who lived in military careers regardless of whether they have faced deployment. Of those who did deploy, the vast majority had deployed to Iraq and/or Afghanistan.

Our sample was largely male (82.5%) and a majority of participants were married (55%), 29% were single, and 13% divorced. Most of the sample was Caucasian (74%). The age spread was relatively broad, with 20% of participants being between the ages of 20-30; 40% between the ages of 31-40; 17% between the ages of 41-50; and 20% age 50 or above. This gives us representative data beginning with several different theatres of war.

The method used to assess the data was a thematic analysis. Thematic analysis (Braun, V. & Clarke, V., 2006) espouses a flexible theoretical framework that acknowledges the need to let the data determine the themes and potential theoretical model that may arise. In a

straightforward thematic analysis, there are very few, if any, theoretical presumptions made prior to assessing the data sets. The thematic analysis applied to this data set can be broken down to a five- step process. First, the data were transcribed from the semi-structured interviews. After transcribing the interviews from recording, I moved line-by-line through the transcriptions, combing it for the semantic themes that would arise in the specific descriptions of the participants' lived experience. Second, meanings were assessed as they arose from the themes and descriptions of the themes were fleshed-out, detailed, and made clear. Third, themes were arranged into categories after comparisons were made among themes. In this step, themes with enough commonality were grouped together into categories. Fourth, higher order categories were formed from a comparison of the meanings that were formed from the themes. These themes served to structure a tree of the data analysis, filling in the branches of these themes with the elucidated meanings and supporting data. Lastly, a final review of the plausibility of the themes selected was assessed.

Thematic analysis ultimately allows space for flexibility in interpreting the data from the interviews. The initial coding phase of the data will espouse a, line-by-line and word-by-word, analytic and open-ended examination of the text. In this process, codes that arise within one interview and across several interviews are tied into themes as they recur on a consistent basis, generally staying attuned to codes and themes that occur frequently and with consistency. Beyond only examining the consistencies in the data and naming them "themes," any unique phrases, inconsistencies, or unusual statements offered by the participant become open-game for thematic analysis as well.

With all research, in particular with qualitative research, generalizability can be difficult to fully assess. Certainly, in this project, the utilization of twenty-five interviews was not intended to provide a definitive picture of generalizable themes. It would be consistent with the history and application of qualitative research to use restraint in presuming the possibility of generalizability.

RESULTS

As we hypothesized at the outset of this study, there was a significant connection between solidarity and camaraderie with platoon members, co-workers, and the consequent life satisfaction of the soldier. Likewise, a connection was demonstrated between the level of combat

excitement the soldier experienced and his or her consequent level of current life satisfaction. Ultimately, it was revealed that veterans work well in a platoon because they felt a strong sense of meaning, unity, and value in these groups. Upon returning to civilian life, many participants were disappointed to find that in the workplace and in American society, any analogous sense of unity and purpose was difficult to replicate. This disappointment resulted in participants experiencing frustration, confusion, ennui, and disorientation, as well as sometimes behaving in antisocial or self-injurious ways. Below is brief summary of these findings:

1. Participants almost unanimously reported a high level of solidarity, trust, and camaraderie among former members of their military platoon.
2. Participants in many cases experienced significant difficulties in replicating any similar sense of solidarity, trust, and camaraderie with their civilian co-workers upon their transition to a civilian career.
3. Many soldiers in this study experienced a high level of distrust for civilians at large. However, in some soldiers, this distrust was articulated as a form of contempt and disrespect for civilians.

In this section, we will elaborate on these themes as they recurred in the interviews. We have attempted to clarify and articulate the participants' lived experience of these themes.

SOLIDARITY, TRUST, & CAMARADERIE WITH PLATOON MEMBERS

Participants' responses showed that the experience of solidarity and camaraderie played a significant role in affecting the lived experience of soldiers during active duty, as well as on their reintegration transition back to civilian life. When asked how connected P1 felt toward members of his platoon, he responded with effusive praise: "There's always people looking out for you...everybody is really close." P1 mentions how a level of solidarity was increased as a result of experiencing combat: "It really came down to my survival and the survival of around me...I would definitely say that defending each other at that time, when we were there, increased the connection." P2 takes this idea up as well, describing the difference between the civilian career he was employed in prior to his military career:

Being in the military, you're a brotherhood. Any soldier or any veteran will tell you that

the biggest thing is camaraderie and that is what you miss the most when you get out. I also miss the adventures, either good or bad. But you are with guys who would die for you or you would die for them so the bond, the camaraderie, is intense.

This sentiment was almost ubiquitous among participants. In general, participants experienced a high level of connection to their platoon members. However, the epicenter of this connection was regularly tied back to the felt sense that participants believed that the other members of their platoon would die for them if they were put in a position to do so. This sense was rarely replicated in their civilian careers.

P₃ mentions how, in many ways, the solidarity between members of a platoon is formed through the process of suffering together in the training process. He mentions how the physical sacrifices made in high level training regimes form a sense of unity among soldiers: “They just smoke the shit out of you for 24 hours and the question is this – what did you learn as a team? Do that for years and now instill it like, get the job done, come on back with all of your boys and then do it again.” He offers further assessment of strengthening solidarity through training, emphasizing that it is through the difficulty, struggles, and sacrifice demanded from individuals in a group training exercise:

Former military are still best friends because they trained together. In Regiment they went to SEER school together. Four of my best friends I still talk to today just because we went through SEER school together. I used to get them punched in the face (at SEER school) but we were in it together! By brining that chaos on board, it builds an esprit de corps, a bond. It goes back to that creed: “I’ll never let a fallen comrade fall into the hand of the enemy.”

When asked what it takes to make it through these high-level training schools, P₃ is succinct: “Teamwork.”

P₄ mentions how, though he wasn’t excited about the aspect of combat, he did feel a desire to move out of the safer places in the forward operating bases while deployed:

If I was sitting on base I felt like I was wasting away and I wasn’t doing my part. I wanted to be out there and I wanted to be on the line. If someone else in my platoon or my company is going out, I felt like I should be out there with them...My goal was making sure that the guy on my left and my right was coming home. That was the main objective in fighting for me.

This passage is unique because it demonstrates a connection to combat arousal here but through solidarity and desire to uphold the duty of shared sacrifice among his platoon members. When asked if this was a meaningful time in his life for being responsible for the life of the person next to him, P4 says, “Oh yeah. I would never change it if I could. The camaraderie and the brotherhood that you have while you’re in the military, there is nothing like it. I would never change it.”

Finally, P6 describes the connection of shared sacrifice he has with former members of his platoon and his coworkers now. When reflecting upon his relationships with members of his former platoon, he says:

They are very good (relationships). I can text them right now and say, “Hey I just got arrested, do you mind giving me \$100?” I would probably end up with \$10,000 in the bank real quick...I am doing a ruck to raise money in a few months. In one week I raised \$11,000 contacting these guys...I have not been stationed with them since 2009 and I could call them up right now and they would say, “move in.”

In this case, P6 expresses the sense that there is still a felt sense of shared sacrifice and connection to his former platoon members. Years after deploying with these soldiers and without any continuous or regular level of contact, former platoon members are still unequivocally the individuals who display the deepest sense of trust and solidarity.

A LACK OF SOLIDARITY & CAMARADERIE WITH CO-WORKERS & CIVILIANS

Just as participants expressed a solidarity with former platoon members, soldiers’ experienced a serious void of solidarity and camaraderie with their civilian coworkers. P1 expresses how there is a lack of connection to his peers and coworkers in his day-to-day life. When asked if he would prefer that being in the military be viewed by society as just another job in America (like a firefighter, teacher, or nurse) – as opposed to a unique career that deserves praise and cannot be understood - he expresses:

That would obviously be great; it is nice that people appreciate what we do and all because your life is on the line. I would never want to say that people shouldn’t be appreciative of (our job) but sometimes people just want to focus on you all of a sudden for some reason. My wife is a nurse practitioner and I was out with her friends. I was trying to get the conversation going about them and once they find out I am a Marine, the conversation was all on me. I get it but she saves lives too!

P1 is a full-time student completing his undergraduate degree. When asked about how connected he felt to other students in his classes, he says: “I am not connected (to them) really at all...I kind of just go there to learn and I don’t try to build rapport a lot.” When asked what the perceived difference is between his fellow students now compared to his former platoon members, he mentions how with students, “(there is no real) looking out for each other. People that I know around here are like, ‘when you leave, you leave,’ but in the military it’s like, ‘if you need anything I’m here for you,’ and you can always rely to call him up.” When explaining why he believes he is more connected to his former platoon members more than civilians, P1 mentions how there was a unique understanding and experience between himself and former soldiers: “[My platoon members and I] have all been miserable [together]. That’s something that brings people closer together. When you’re miserable, going through training and all of this, life is just hard and it brings people together.”

P8 mentions the difference between his peers in college versus the members of his former platoon:

College is a totally different thing...Everybody is just going about their lives...But when you go to the military, the people that are in your platoon or squad, you’re close with like that. There is not a greater bond. Your friends in street or whatever might say, “Oh, I’d take a bullet for you or something,” but you know for a fact that in the military they really will.

Resonating with the theme expressed in the previous section, the belief that the individuals around one would be willing to die for you forms a profound bond of connection. There are so few civilian careers that would even broach such a possibility. We speculate that in most civilian careers, there is a loathsome resistance on the part of human resource departments and upper-management to ever authentically address issues and events relating to sacrifice, courage, and the bonds that one forms with peers in a dangerous environment. This is a fundamental juxtaposition from military careers where mastery of this territory is at the epicenter of the training process. Furthermore, when moving into one’s civilian career, there is, at best, massive ambiguity over who might offer one’s life for another. Beyond this, there is uncertainty for the soldier over the circumstances that might call one to demonstrate sacrifice for his or her peers in civilian careers. In short, the stakes are not the same and many soldiers felt these lowered stakes led to a diminished sense of trust.

When describing the relationship between his former superiors in the military versus his civilian bosses, P₁₂ says:

Sometimes rank can be intimidating but usually its always in good faith. If they are telling you to do something there is always a reason for that in the military. [After I left the military], I've had bosses that were younger than me. I had a boss that was younger than me and he tried to basically boss me around and I ended up quitting because I've done things in my life that were so much more impactful. What's he done? He tried to boss me around. I just walked off.

P₁₂ finds that there is a severe and almost elemental distrust toward his bosses when reintegrating into his civilian career. With his civilian bosses, his tendency is to question their credentials, intention, and integrity ("What's he done?"). Certainly, P₁₂ was harshly directed by platoon sergeants and superiors during his military career. It is not as if during his military career he was spoken to and directed with gentleness and care while in his civilian career he was treated harshly. The tone of instruction and direction may not have been much different from the military superior to the civilian superior. Yet, the differences lie in a belief in the intentionality of the superior.

P₃'s civilian career led to a unique opportunity among our participants. Despite never completing a graduate degree, he had procured work as a college instructor in the Military Sciences department at an elite undergraduate American college. Despite this otherwise prestigious position relative to the careers many of his former peers and the soldiers in this study were able to land, he expresses a profound disconnect between himself and his fellow professors:

So when I go into a meeting at the faculty of [the undergraduate institution] and I go and talk to them because they're always in the books, books, books, which is fine! But they lack the social skills you need. When you're in a real position of leadership, you're always interacting.

When asked about the leadership he experiences at the college, he discusses the detachment he experiences between the college deans and the students/faculty:

The only time they talk to students is if they need to attend to something because of an award or because one student got in trouble. I don't see interactions as much as the military would. The mechanical engineers don't talk to the math people. It's like, "Who are you again?" ...So we go to faculty meetings, and we have the social time and the provost starts it off and he asks questions, and there's no interactions. "What do you guys

think about this?" But no one says anything, and the guy is like "hey we can't leave here until decisions are made." It's so frustrating. Whether right or wrong, as a leader you make a decision and give your subordinates an opportunity to agree or disagree. It may be happening, but I don't see that as much in the civilian side.

The sentiment expressed here is that there is some basic lack of a form of knowledge among college deans and faculty. In short, there is a unique form of insight into the values, communication styles, and duties one ought to demonstrate in order to lead a group of one's peers and subordinates. Furthermore, he perceives a lack of leadership that causes a vacuum for the group and an ambiguity about how to move forward with difficult decisions. P6 goes on to express what type of civilian career might have been a better fit for his leadership style: "My brother is a cop and if you don't do things exactly, and you don't do things step by step how it's supposed to be, you're done, you're fired. So there's no flexibility."

P25 describes the juxtaposition between his experiences with his 1st Sergeant in Iraq versus his civilian boss when he returned home:

We were under fire in Fallujah. It was the height of the combat there. An RPG came into my unit and I was the radio operator so even at 19 years old I was high value to the unit. My 1st Sergeant dove on top of me to protect me from shrapnel. When I returned home, I had a career working as an armed guard for a money delivery truck. One of the banks I was dropping money off at that day was being robbed. My boss didn't even call me. I was expendable to him.

The juxtaposition here may have been one of the starkest among participants when asked about the difference between their leaders in their platoon and their civilian bosses/managers. For P25, as a teenager in Iraq, his boss (1st Sergeant) clearly risked his life so that P25 might continue to fight the enemy. P25 was a radio operator in his unit and his 1st Sergeant found him to be so valuable to the platoon that his life was worth sacrificing for. Upon returning to the country that he had fought for as a young Marine, P25 had limited employment opportunities, many of which only existed in the sector of private security. He was hired to guard money as it was being delivered to banks and ATM's. In juxtaposition to his 1st sergeant risking his life for P25 in Iraq, his boss in America failed to communicate to him that his life was imminently at risk. It is important to understand the nuances here. One of the primary responsibilities for managers at money truck companies have is to monitor warnings on the routes of their employees and notify those employees if the bank is at risk or being robbed. His boss's inability to communicate this

to P25 was not only a basic failure of his responsibilities; it communicated to P25 that he was replaceable and worthless to the company. This is a stark juxtaposition, but P25's story can serve as somewhat of an archetype for many of the participants' experiences in their civilian careers and with their civilian bosses.

P5 and P16 experienced similar career transitions to P25. P16 was a reserve soldier serving as an LPN in his civilian career as well as for the U.S. Army. He deployed to Iraq for an 18-month tour of service, took a two-week vacation, and returned immediately to work in the hospital that employed him in his civilian career. After 91 days, P16 was fired by his employer without cause. The explanation was brief – his manager told him that his coworkers felt uncomfortable around him and they perceived he was “on edge” while at work. He conceded experiencing some level of anxiety during this 3-month period; he had just returned from a major combat zone during the height of the Iraq surge. Nonetheless, when following up with P16 about whether or not he was “on edge” while in Iraq, he likewise conceded. However, he expressed that when he was anxious at work in Iraq, his platoon members were able to empathize and even be upfront with him, telling him bluntly to regain his composure. In his civilian career, he never had one direct communication or even blunt confrontation with his coworkers. When reflecting, he had become a pariah and an outcast in his civilian career. His coworkers and bosses were unable to aid him in this difficult transition and he was essentially discarded by the company. Lastly, it is vital to note why he was terminated after 91 days – 90 days is the legal limit that an employer must retain a soldier returning from deployment.

P5 describes his first career after returning from Afghanistan, working at a fortune 1000 company:

I worked for an industrial laundry and facilities services company...There was a small leadership team and I was part of the leadership team. I had a group of 10 guys that would go out and drive all over the state. I was one of two veterans out of two to three hundred employees. No one understood who I was or what I was doing or where I was coming from or anything I'd done. It was a male dominated workforce but (the workers) were just kind of you know, “He's just a he's a crazy veteran.” That was kind of the attitude - “Oh, he was in Afghanistan.” They were naïve to a point of not knowing what questions to ask and not ask and all that kind of stuff. It wasn't a bad experience, they just had no idea how to deal with it. Most of them hadn't met anyone who had been overseas before. My boss certainly didn't know how to deal with it. He just wanted to see the numbers. The job

sucked; I hated it.

All three participants express, albeit to varying degrees, a striking level of disconnect and mistrust of their coworkers and bosses. However, the main connecting piece to all three accounts appears to be a sense that the former soldier simply is not as valuable or significant to his or her civilian bosses and coworkers as he or she was to members of their former platoon.

DISRESPECT & CONTEMPT TOWARD CIVILIANS

Moving a step beyond this felt sense of disconnect among participants in their civilian lives and jobs, some participants went further, expressing an open disrespect and contempt towards civilians. When asked about what was missing from his civilian life and relationships, P2 says:

I wouldn't hold it against anyone [in my civilian life], but I would say yeah, that lack of understanding could play a role. It's harder to understand what it's like to go through deployments or move away from your family when a lot of people have never even left their hometown for more than just vacations. That is just something different (between soldiers and civilians).

When following up with P1 as to what a solution to this might be, the interviewer asked him to reflect on how he might feel if he were now a veteran living in a society that required mandatory service. P1 expresses:

It would be good for citizens to experience something like a military – it doesn't have to be the Marines – but it would be a good growing experience for them. Do I think that would be the best thing for the military? No. I think volunteer forces are more proactive. But even some kind of homeland security job or something, I think civilians would benefit greatly from it. **Now they would actually be contributing to America rather than just living off of America, you know?** That's one of the biggest things I look at (with civilians), doing something for the place that you live in. But not everybody's fit for the military.

The tone and content of P2's contempt for civilians grows as the interviewer continues to press on the subject and it was by no means uncommon for participants to express their frustrations and anger toward civilians in this way. Nonetheless, the contempt is deep and ubiquitous here. P2 begins this passage by saying the gap is only one of understanding – a lack of perspective resulting from a lack of shared experience. However, similar to other participants, he felt that many civilians were not only unfit for military service, but that by not serving in the military, they were not making a serious and tangible sacrifice or service to their nation.

P5 is more explicit in describing the gap between his relationship with former members of his platoon and his civilian coworkers and peers. When asked if he feels connected to, supported by, or understood by civilians, his response is striking:

No. Honestly, not really. I don't know, I just think **they are like a different breed...**They just go about their daily life. They don't really understand what goes on in the world. Not just war lives, but there is people out there starving. There is people out there that are homeless. Civilians are oblivious and you know a lot of them just don't have any common sense. But I don't know. I don't really have any problems with them.

Similar to P2, the curious part of this passage, is how the participant feels a need to buttress the contempt for civilians with an expression of emotional detachment from that sense. "But I don't know. I don't really have any problems with them," is in fundamental juxtaposition with his previous statements on civilians, referring to them as, essentially, a different form of human, a form that lacks empathy, awareness, and a proper sense of responsibility for his or her world. He also explains that he has little faith in the possibility of building trust or solidarity with civilians he works with. He states, "I came to the realization that it is not going to happen because civilians are not in any kind of situation like we were and we are not going to build that trust."

As mentioned before, P6 has had the unique opportunity of serving as faculty at a prestigious college in the department of military science. When asked if he feels like he fits into his workplace or with his coworkers, he describes a significant gap between he and his peers at the college:

I probably only converse with two people. One of those two is the generator guy – a great guy – and one is a girl in the Registrar's office. But everyone else, no. When I walk by an instructor or professor and I say, "Hello," or "Good morning," they say, "that's good morning **professor.**" So I rebut and say, "Well that's good morning **master sergeant.**" They get pissed...Most of these professors are liberals over there – "let's put vaginas on our head and march for Hillary," or something. With my job profession and entire uniform and I'm not into politics. I don't give a fuck who is my boss – democrat, republican, I don't care. So the other professors? No. I am not connected to them at all.

Again, a clear level of mistrust and contempt for one's peers is articulated. P6 feels no respect from other professors and holds a deep mistrust for their social and political ideology. Similar to the previous participants, there appears to be some contextualizing of the contempt

("I'm not into politics. I don't give a fuck who my boss is") as the participant attempts to gain some distance from his original disdain for his peers and colleagues. However, when P6 asked why he does feel connected to the custodians and generator workers and his response was succinct: "Because those are the guys who get things done."

P6 goes further, explaining why he feels so disconnected from his neighbors and peers. First, there is a severe gap derived from the lack of knowledge civilians have around basic components of military culture:

It annoys me to talk to a civilian and they are like, "Yeah, I know about the military because my brother is in the Army." It's like, "shut the fuck up." [My neighbor] comes over and is like, "Yeah, my brother in law is in the SF." "Oh, yeah? What is his name?" I don't even know this guy and I know everyone in that unit. This dude doesn't have a clue...this motherfucker.

My wife looks at me – because she knows, she was Air Force – and she's just like, stop. Please, stop...

He continues, expressing how he feels that his neighbors are vapid and superficial and that he cannot identify with their lack of true values:

Everyone in our neighborhood owns their houses except us; we rent. They all play the money game. "Oh, look what I can do." Meanwhile, I'm like, I'm gonna cut my grass but I don't care if it's the greenest grass. No. I'm just riding this thing with my beer...I lose too much energy with these people who don't understand.

Beyond his colleagues at work, P6 also expresses a level of contempt for his neighbors and those he interacts with in his community on a day-to-day basis. This contempt seems to be drawn from two sources. First, he perceives a lack of knowledge civilians have over military life and functioning. He mentions how his wife understands because she has had prior service. However, his neighbor – making what could be attributed to a very simple misspeak regarding the activity of his brother-in-law – provokes an experience of disdain, as well as a mistrust of this individual's intentions. Any attempt by the neighbor to empathize with or attempt to understand P6's military experience is met with utter contempt ("This dude doesn't have a clue...this motherfucker"). Second, P6 perceives an egregious level of vanity among his neighbors. Something as basic as how everyone mows their lawn is a symbol of detachment and self-centeredness. In his estimation, the lawn being cut is a practical matter, not an aesthetic

one. Yet, the reason why it becomes an aesthetic matter for his neighbors – a vanity matter, at that – is because he believes his neighbors are all playing some competitive game that he simply feels is his beneath him.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study have led us to reflect on the role that the vacuum of solidarity and combat excitement might have on the soldier as he or she reintegrates to their civilian career. This study, though inductive, leads us to suggest that with some soldiers, the symptoms related to PTSD might be tied back to the relational and psychological voids experienced in the transition to a civilian career. We draw several conclusions for further research from these results.

First, we think it's worth reexamining whether PET – used as a treatment for PTSD related symptoms – should be used in an isolated setting. Typically, PET is a form of therapy where the patient – in this case, the soldier – recounts the details of his or her traumatic experiences repeatedly in an effort to reappraise his or her perceptions of the event and gain a sense of emotional and cognitive control. It is quite likely that the difficulties experienced by the patient in PET are exacerbated by the isolating nature of the therapy. Despite lacking much empirical backing to date, the results of this study dovetail with theoretical and anecdotal literature to suggest that a form of recounting/retelling that is more public and shared with the community would have a greater benefit for the soldier (Tick, 2004). In short, the results of this study show that the isolation experienced by veterans, by the sheer nature of the small number of Americans who serve, should not be doubled-down-on in the therapeutic setting.

Second, military attitudes toward civilians and the disdain that was expressed from some participants demands immediate further research. In every creed and oath an American soldier swears allegiance to, there is an explicit and unconditional imperative to serve and protect the life, liberty, safety, and wellbeing of every American citizen. The level of contempt expressed by some participants toward civilians is quite likely to cause difficulties for the reintegration of that soldier from a purely prosocial and relational perspective. Moreover, an argument could be made that feeling this way toward civilians is also likely to damage the soldiers' tasks and duties while serving in the military. Reconciling this disdain and forging healthier mindsets toward civilian culture should be of the utmost importance in all levels of military research (i.e. social

reintegration, motivation, work performance, etc.). In light of what was clearly a sentiment of, at minimum, distance and distrust from participants to civilians, what can be done to bridge this gap in a nation that does not require mandatory service? Further research must continue to probe this chasm and establish grounds for an appropriate therapeutic and social/cultural response to mend this gap veterans often experience when reintegrating into civilian society. As a result, we believe that significant research should be devoted to this topic, as it is unlikely to come up right away in an inductive setting, and certainly is likely to stay tacit in quantitative research.

Theoretical considerations - The allure of war

A broad array of thinkers (Junger 2016; Junger, 2010; Hedges, 2004) – from psychologists, to philosophers, to war journalists – have speculated upon the draw to war and other violence circumstances for those who engage in conflict and/or live in warzones. It is important to examine the allure of war, violence, and violent circumstances in relation to a lifestyle that conditions and promotes violent tendencies, mindsets, and behaviors.

Sebastian Junger’s renowned and acclaimed documentary “Restrepo” was produced and released alongside his book “War” (2010). Both serve to recount the experience of the young men who served in 110th Infantry Battle Company in the Korengal Valley in Eastern Afghanistan between the years 2007 and 2008. When Junger discusses killing, he turns his attention toward the complex relationship that some soldiers have to this facet of combat. Despite the antipathy to some aspects of combat (e.g. death of comrades), there is an incredible sense of purpose, meaning, and connection to one’s peers that an individual may find in violent situations. Junger writes:

Perfectly sane, good men have been drawn back to combat over and over again, and anyone interested in the idea of world peace would do well to know what they’re looking for. Not killing, necessarily...but the other side of the equation: protecting. The defense of the tribe is an insanely compelling idea, and once you’ve been exposed to it, there’s almost nothing else you’d rather do. (Junger, 2010, p. 214)

In this case, the draw was a primal reckoning of certain instincts that lead an individual, even a sane and moral individual, to return to violent circumstances. Despite the fact that neither the vulnerability of one’s platoon members nor the killing of the enemy is totally

satisfying to all soldiers, there is an incredible sense of honor and dignity in standing courageously in the midst of risking harm to oneself for the sake of others.

Furthermore, Farrell (2001) focuses on the sense of disposability that is experienced by those who engage in high-risk careers in American society. He argues that there is a socialized form of misandry toward those who take up these careers and, essentially, a societal lack of concern over the risks involved in high-risk lines of work. Connected to Junger, one can see how a form of apathy, frustration, and dissociation might be formed in soldiers who come from active duty to civilian life. In military settings and communities, there is high regard, mutual respect, and true understanding for the nature of the work soldiers engage in. It would be difficult to replicate this sense of purpose and mutual empathy in civilian life even if the society one was returning had a strong regard for these careers. In a culture that does not value their work, the soldier is likely to form a deep sensitivity to this disregard. The transition from a world of regard and respect to one of disposability is likely to exacerbate some of these psychosocial struggles.

Junger's most recent work (2016) explores the cultural and anthropological history of societal connectedness in society. The text opens with a reflection upon the juxtaposing cultures of early Native American tribes and the early British colonial settlers to America. Junger reflects on a curious historical phenomenon at the beginning of this cultural melting pot. As British culture was pushing itself up against Native American culture, Junger recounts how there were hundreds, if not thousands, of cases of British settlers fleeing the confines of Protestant British culture for life with the natives. Junger does not look to reduce the etiology of this desire, however, he points to one significant factor accounting for the exodus. Native American tribes offered a source of solidarity and connection for settlers who had been living in a isolating and self-empowering society. The unity and shared sacrifice of the tribes offered a level of identity and meaning for these settlers well beyond the myopia of individualism. In many ways, life was more difficult for an individual fleeing colonial society, but the price was worth it. He writes, "Humans don't mind hardship, in fact they thrive on it; what they mind is not feeling necessary. Modern society has perfected the art of making people not feel necessary" (Junger, 2016). Junger

continues, connecting this to the gap between military personnel and civilians in modern society:

What would you risk dying for – and for whom – is perhaps the most profound question a person can ask themselves. The vast majority of people in modern society are able to pass their whole lives without ever having to answer that question, which is both an enormous blessing and a significant loss.

According to Junger, it is on these grounds that an overwhelming division has been established between military culture and American society. Veterans experience this social vacuum when they return to the society that they defended and the experience is undoubtedly disorienting.

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A DEMAND FOR A NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR MEN IN INDIA: A RATIONALE AND ITS POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES

Anant Kumar



ABSTRACT

There are instances where women have misused anti-dowry or violence against women laws to maliciously implicate and harass men and their family members. Despite being innocent, families are lagging behind bars in prison for years. The men and their family members believe that they do not have adequate legal provision or protection. They are demanding to constitute a separate commission for men, where they can share their concerns, defend themselves, and safeguard the interests of their family members. Will the constitution of separate commission for men be able to stop women from doing atrocities on men and their families?

Keywords: men's rights, gender, violence against men, dowry harassment, crime against men, national commission for men, India

In recent years, men have been demanding that a National Commission for Men be created. This demand has been steadily growing across many cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Lucknow, Jaipur, Surat, Bhubaneswar and Ranchi, especially by those institutions or individuals who are fighting for men's rights or those who are being oppressed by women and their families. Organizations such as the All India Men's Welfare Association, the Save Indian Family Foundation, and the Samaj Suraksha Manch believe that dowry harassment, domestic violence and other laws are being misused by women who wish to harass males or their family members. They believe that these laws favour women who have often misused anti-dowry or violence-against-women laws to harass men or their family members. Despite being innocent, many have been imprisoned. They have been implicated in false cases of dowry demand and its associated oppression, particularly under the anti-dowry Act (Section 498-A) and domestic violence act (Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005). The National Crime Record Bureau (2016) reports 24,620 false cases of crime against women, which includes 6,745 false cases of cruelty by husband of his relatives, 8,623 false cases of kidnapping and abduction of women, 2,839 false cases of rape, and 254 false cases of dowry death. From time to time, the courts have also taken cognizance of these false cases. The Supreme Court of India, expressing its concerns over them, has directed that family welfare committee be set up in each district to examine the authenticity of dowry harassment complaints; the Supreme Court of India has also mentioned that no arrest or coercive action should be taken on such complaints without ascertaining the veracity of such allegations (Choudhary, 2017).

Although the above-mentioned organizations are conscious of the atrocities done on women, they believe that the protection of women's interests should not be at the cost of men. They believe that men are also victims of domestic violence but lack adequate legal provision or protection. Many men have lost the best years of their lives and even their careers fighting false dowry harassment and domestic-violence allegations made by their spouses who take advantage of the loopholes in the laws intended to protect women—most commonly, Section 498A of the IPC (Mukherjee, 2016). There is no commission that protects men's interests, no government body where men can share their concerns, defend themselves, and safeguard the interests of their family members and atrocities against them. These organizations have been talking to various

forums and political parties, urging that the National Commission for Men be constituted so that the interests of the oppressed men and their families can be protected. In this regard, these institutions have written to the President, to the Prime Minister and to Members of Parliament and gave the memorandum. They have also approached MPs about submitting a private member bill in the parliament to enact a law for the protection of men from domestic violence and other atrocities and abuses (Nanjappa, 2015).

In such a situation, it is reasonable to ask whether the solution of these problems is possible through the constitution of the National Commission for Men. Will the National Commission for Men be able to stop women from doing atrocities to men and their families? The Crime Record Bureau statistics show that despite the establishment of the National Commission for Women and their tireless efforts, laws and interventions, the number of atrocities to women has increased. Even today, women feel insecure. As far as misuse of these laws by women against men and their families and colleagues, are concerned, requisite amendments should be made to those laws to prevent such misuse.

Violence against men and their families by women is not a new phenomenon. Men have been victims of physical violence; domestic violence; intimidation; hurtful, controlling words and behaviours; workplace harassment; and financial extortion. Due to recent educational- and job-opportunities, women-empowerment programmes, and other government and non-government social and economic interventions; women's control over resources within household has increased. In addition, their consciousness concerning their rights has increased (Kaur, 2015). Power struggles and conflicts over resources have consequently arisen between men and women. In these cases, the powerful win, and the powerless are defeated and exploited, irrespective of their gender and class caste. This change in power relations has affected men and women relations. While women are excited about their increasing power and position, men are scared and worried (Kumar, 2012). Under these circumstances, striving to develop a power equal society based on equality, equity and mutual respect seems to be the only reasonable solution to the problem.

Given their serious consequences, atrocities on men by women cannot be denied, pushed aside or ignored. However, at the same time, one must realize that the constitution of a National Commission for Men might not be the only solution to this problem. The possibility cannot be ruled out that this commission might increase the confrontation between itself and the National Commission for Women, a result that would benefit neither men nor women. To prevent such an outcome, the Government could restructure and rename the National Commission for Women, making it gender neutral and allow it to address issues raised by both men and women and to advocate for necessary changes in laws to prevent its misuse. At present, the National Commission for Women has only one male member. Ideally, the commission should have equal representation of all genders including the third gender. It is necessary to understand that the relations among the community, the family, men and women and the spouse go with mutual trust, respect for each other and social capital. In the process of negotiating gender equality, equity, and mutual respect, the courts, laws, and commissions have their own limitations.

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Brady Jandreau in *The Rider*

A REQUIEM FOR MANHOOD

Paul Nathanson



ABSTRACT

Once upon a time, there was a world in which men could establish a healthy collective identity by contributing to society something that was distinctive, necessary and publicly valued. That is no longer true. The Rider explores one example of this problem: Lakota men in a world with no room for them specifically as men. That world is no more, not among them and not among us, although it did exist within living memory. This becomes clear by comparing The Rider with an older movie about manhood: The Best Years of Our Lives. Instead of mourning a significant loss that afflicts everyone, directly or indirectly, feminists have reacted by claiming that masculinity is inherently “toxic.” This article is a personal response.

Keywords: feminism, gender, movies, identity, maleness, manhood, masculinity, men, toxic masculinity

Yesterday was a fine spring day. On my way out for the afternoon, I saw a some yellow tulips shyly lifting their heads to the sky and the first bright and feathery leaves unfolding on branches. And yet I spent the afternoon indoors at a movie. It's about the decline of manhood and therefore should be of great interest to everyone who cares about men. Here's a synopsis of *The Rider* (Chloé Zhao, 2018).

Its setting is a Lakota reservation in the "badlands" of North Dakota. Brady is a beautiful young man, who loves horses and can't imagine a life without caring for them and riding them. He lives in poverty with his retarded younger sister and widowed father. But Brady has a big problem, and it isn't poverty. It's the result of falling from his horse during a rodeo. Even with a metal plate in his skull, he still has seizures now and then. One symptom is his right hand, which clenches uncontrollably and makes it impossible for him to use the reins effectively while riding. For a while, Brady maintains the hope of recovering fully and makes a little money by taming the local wild horses. When that proves too difficult, he gets a menial job in the local supermarket. Nonetheless, he enjoys being with two friends and visiting a third friend in hospital. Lane has had a similar fall but been much more severely wounded. He can neither walk nor speak. But Brady's visits to the hospital always leave Lane more cheerful than he usually is. The great love of Brady's life is Apollo, however, his ill-fated horse. Eventually, Brady realizes that he will never be able to live his dream and enact his identity. His ultimate fate remains unknown as the closing credits roll.

The Lakota in this movie reveal deep ambivalence about their identity. On the one hand, they're Americans. They speak English (when they speak at all, which is not often) and have English names. Brady and his friends call themselves "cowboys" (certainly not "Indians"). As in "western" movies, they adopt "cowboy" costumes (notably big black or white hats), use saddles on their horses (instead of riding bare-back) and perform in "cowboy" rituals (such as rodeos). At dusk, sitting around campfires on grassy meadows and watching the sun dip below the long horizon, they play their guitars and sing "country" songs. These people are Christians, moreover, which is why Brady's mother lies in a graveyard with many crosses.

On the other hand, these people are unlike other Americans, even other western or poor Americans. They retain at least some sense that manhood was once a noble calling. (And I'm not referring merely to the poster in one scene that urges readers to believe that "the Lakota way is a

good way.”) Brady and the other men in this movie, for instance are capable of caring for each other and even of compassion. Brady loves his sister and acknowledges his need to protect her. His seemingly laissez-faire father sacrifices his own desires in order to buy a horse for his son and later shows up at the rodeo to cheer him on (after angrily warning Brady to heed a medical warning). Like many American men, it’s true, these dudes have emotional lives that they express most intensely in gestures or even silence rather than words. In one scene, Brady weeps privately over his fate. In another scene, he and his friends hug each other. *Unlike* many other American men, though, these men are very careful about expressing one particular emotion. Of interest here is their passivity, which contrasts with the rage of many other poor communities. *Neither*, of course, is characteristic of a healthy collective identity. I’ll return to that in a moment.

Historic versions of masculinity, including the traditional Lakota version, have become *vestigial*. The lives of Lakota men still revolve around horses, to be sure, but that very fact isolates them from modernity and makes them living anachronisms. These “riders” might sell a few horses to ranchers or tourists, for instance, but their only real opportunity to earn money is by performing at rodeos: modern rituals with nostalgic value but no economic (or military) value. These ceremonial events can no longer function as a coming-of-age ritual for boys, at any rate, because preparing for them doesn’t equip them with the knowledge or skills that would ensure communal survival. (Rodeos are thus like the jousting tournaments in late-medieval Europe—that is, long after jousting had lost any relation to the dissolving feudal system. By that time, tournaments had come to focus on the preservation of aristocratic status, symbolically, at a time of increasing social mobility due to the revival of trade and commerce.) Consequently, the boys *remain boys*. As many people know by now, this is precisely the fate of so many boys in all modern, or postmodern, societies.

Not surprisingly, *The Rider* includes both explicit and implicit references to *death*. Brady visits his mother’s grave in an early scene, for instance, where he prays to, for and somehow with her. Toward the end, moreover, Apollo is wounded and must be “put down.” Brady says that his own fate would be the same as Apollo’s if he had been a horse; being a man, he must (lamentably) live with his wounds no matter how crippling they are. And yet he clearly tries to kill himself by riding in another rodeo and thus rejecting the warnings of his physician. Other references to death, however, are implicit. The cinematography features North Dakota’s

beautiful landscape—flat, bleak and largely empty but also open to infinity both horizontally and vertically. (Could that suggest eternity as well? Possibly.) I found it distinctly sad. How long will this wilderness survive the onslaught of urbanization, industrialization—and now, judging from the garbage and abandoned machinery that litter parts of the cinematic landscape, de-industrialization? I found the background music equally beautiful and sad. It, too, is elegiac and almost funereal.

At the surface level, this movie is about the fate of one young man and his friends. At a deeper level, it's about the fate of all men on their tribal reservation. Every major character and almost every minor character, after all, is male. And at a still deeper level, it's about the fate of manhood in American society. Instead of heaping shame and contempt on these faltering and vulnerable men and therefore on men in general, Chloe Zhao has written and directed what amounts to a *requiem* for manhood. Why would she choose to do so in the specific context of tribal men? It's because tribal societies have long been symbols for so many other Americans of decline, defeat, marginality and therefore of "death." Zhao refrains from reminding viewers of the many social problems that afflict these peoples (including those of the Pine Ridge Reservation, where she shot this movie with non-professional actors). Her goal is not to study this community, so *The Rider* is not (fortunately) a sociological or anthropological treatise on them in the cinematic form. Rather, her goal is to *mourn the decline and distortion* of masculine tradition in modern societies. The whole movie functions as an epitaph. I'm thinking of what Linda tells her son Biff in *Death of a Salesman*: "I don't say he's a great man. Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. He's not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person."

Once upon a time, though, masculinity was *not* some historical anachronism or anthropological curiosity. It was a distinctive, necessary and publicly valued way of life. This morning, by chance, I watched an earlier cinematic exploration of manhood in trouble. In *The Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler, 1946), three soldiers return from combat in World War II and try to pick up their lives again but find that they have to start all over. Originally, this movie was Hollywood's attempt to comment on a current social problem: the re-integration of

veterans after years of combat overseas. Watched now, though, after more than seventy years, *Best Years* is even more disturbing and more moving than it ever was.



© Alamy: Dana Andrews, Myrna Loy and Teresa Wright in *The Best Years of Our Lives*.

Of the three returning soldiers, only one seems destined, at first, to succeed in peacetime. Before the war, Al had been a happily married man of the upper middle class. His wife and daughter greet him with joy. He can begin right away, therefore, to resume his old life. He steps back into his job at a bank. The war has not changed that. It has, however, changed Al. When another former soldier comes to his office and asks for a loan, Al is delighted to help him start a business—even though the younger man lacks collateral. Al's boss is less than pleased. He's interested only in making money on secure loans, not in rewarding patriotism or gambling on the youthful ambition that has made America the land of opportunity. But Al's wife does understand what the war has done to him and supports his idealism.

Before the war, Fred had been materialistic and hedonistic. Not surprisingly, he had married someone with the same outlook. But the war has changed him no less than Al. He returns with no money, no job and no idea of what would give meaning to his survival in combat. To make ends meet, he takes the only available job and becomes a soda jerk at the local drugstore. Trouble is, his wife wants only to live it up as if no war had intervened—and if not

with Fred, then with some other man.

Before the war, Homer had been a happy-go-lucky boy whose thoughts about the future extended only to marrying the girl next door and living happily ever after. But the war has changed him even more than the others. Homer's hands have been burnt off in combat, leaving him with steel hooks to replace them. Although he has learned how to use these effectively, he has trouble adjusting to public curiosity and, even worse, pity from his girlfriend—even though she has both the undiminished love and the courage to marry him anyway.

All three men, as I say, have endured years of suffering as soldiers in wartime, the ultimate proving ground of *manhood* in their world. Each manages to re-invent himself as a *man* according to universally accepted virtues of *masculinity*, which they can re-affirm along with everyone else—*despite its heavy price*. These virtues include not only courage and self-sacrifice but also integrity, honesty, generosity, tenacity, compassion and faithfulness (virtues not limited to male people except for their particular manifestations in daily life). One scene is particularly moving in this respect. At the soda fountain, a cynical middle-aged man tells Homer that the war had been unnecessary—and so had the sacrifices of so many young men like Homer himself, who have ended up either dead or mutilated. Homer rejects this point of view as a matter of honor, and Fred, who overhears the conversation, comes to his aid by slugging the stranger (thus losing his lowly job at the soda fountain).

Best Years is not merely a sad story, not for me. As a refugee from the mid-twentieth-century, I allowed my eyes to linger on its costumes and sets. More important, I allowed my mind to explore its beliefs about how families and communities work, especially its beliefs about manhood. Those things came from another world, one that I had known intimately long ago. It was the world of my childhood, the one that my parents bequeathed to me with all of their love and hope. Nothing is left of it now, nothing but ruins—that is, relentless rage and pervasive cynicism. No wonder my dead parents continue to *haunt* me. You could say that I feel “nostalgic,” but that word, despite its etymology, has come to connote something superficial, misguided or even shameful. What I am, truly, is intensely *homesick* (which says something about a man who was intensely unhappy as a child almost everywhere *but* at home). I want desperately to live once again in a world that, despite its terrible flaws (such as war, class conflict and racial segregation), made sense at least as a *shared and uniting ideal*. At home, I had both

unconditional love and earned respect. More important, I understood that men and women actually needed and tried to support each other.

I feel now like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*. Captured in a witch's gloomy castle, she looks into her captor's sinister crystal ball and sees the farm back in Kansas. Sick with worry, Auntie Em is calling out for her. In the gloomy castle, though, Dorothy looks around her in despair and says, "I'm frightened, Auntie Em, I'm frightened." And so am I but not only for myself. What, I ask over and over, am I doing here? How did we all get here? What went wrong? Is there really nothing left that's worth fighting or even dying for? Those are not only historical, anthropological, psychological, political or even moral questions. Considering the rapid fragmentation of our society into a seething collection of polarized identity groups, these questions are also existential ones.

This brings me to what I've been saying for years about the problem of manhood today: the inability of men, at least so far, to create a *healthy identity* for themselves (as distinct from allowing women to create an unhealthy one for them). A healthy identity emerges from and fosters at least one *distinctive, necessary and publicly valued contribution* that men can make specifically *as men* to society. (Fatherhood is possibly the only, remaining source for a healthy collective identity, and that has already been trivialized and even demonized beyond recognition.) Failing to establish a healthy identity, more than a few men succumb to either passivity or rage—or both. This is true of more and more young men not only individually but also collectively. The statistics don't lie. Some boys and men abandon a society with no room for them *male people*; they give up, drop out or kill themselves. Others turn against society, believing that even a negative identity is better than no identity at all; they kill themselves, too, and sometimes (in the context of personal psychopathology) take others with them.

My point here is not merely to eulogize masculinity as I knew it in my own youth. That gender paradigm had its flaws, notably its association of maleness with what Warren Farrell calls "disposability." Being gay when homosexuality was considered either immoral or sick, moreover, I was a victim of both boys and girls who had no understanding of masculinity (or femininity) and therefore no way of placing conventional markers of gender within larger cultural, historical and moral contexts. They bullied me relentlessly because I was different from them in that way, but I could have been equally different in many other ways.

My point here really is, however, to assert that masculinity per se (not this or that version of it) is more than some arbitrary or oppressive “social construction,” let alone one that originates in the sinister motivation of men to “dominate” women. If I’m correct, then we’re not quite free to abandon it as a disease to be cured in accordance with this or that fashionable ideology. Rather, as I now see after many years of denial, masculinity of one kind or another is a universal feature of human societies (no matter how minimal any gender system might be in some cultures).

To put it bluntly, I don’t believe that our society can continue to pathologize or demonize just about every feature of masculinity (or even maleness itself) without continuing to destroy the personal and collective identities of half the population.

I’ll conclude with a sad comment on manhood in my own environment. Long ago and in a galaxy far away, the ideal Jewish man was (and still is in some communities) a Torah scholar. For *Life Is with People*, sociologists Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog interviewed Jewish women from pre-war Eastern Europe. Asked what made men look sexy, the women agreed that men should look pale and thin—as if they could afford to spend entire days in the synagogue praying and studying rabbinic commentaries on the Torah. Translated into secular terms, the ideal Jewish man became a doctor, a lawyer or an academic. Without the spiritual matrix, however, the Jewish ideal differed little from the ideals of many (but by no means all) other communities. It became a very effective way to climb out of poverty and rise in status. That worked for two or three generations, but it doesn’t work so well now. Apart from the Hasidim, Jewish men today face the same problems as those of men in general, let alone Lakota men: cultural indifference, ideological hostility and, most important of all, vocational obsolescence. What replaced the traditional Jewish ideal animates bitterly satirical novels by authors such as Philip Roth and Mordecai Richler. No ideal of manhood, in short, has escaped erosion and distortion.

Author profile




Paul Nathanson has a BA (art history), a BTh (Christian theology), an MLS (library service), an MA (religious studies) and a PhD (religious studies). Of particular interest to him is the surprisingly blurry relation between religion and secularity: how religion underlies seemingly secular phenomena such as popular movies and political ideologies. With Katherine Young, he is writing a series on the problem of masculine identity in an age of identity politics and sexual polarization. Four volumes are already in print: *Spreading Misandry: The Teaching of Contempt for Men in Popular Culture*; *Legalizing Misandry: From Public Shame to Systemic Discrimination against Men*; *Sanctifying Misandry: Goddess Ideology and the Fall of Man*; and *Replacing Misandry: A Revolutionary History of the Male Body*.

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WRITING ABOUT FEMINISM AND TOXIC MASCULINITY

Gerard Nicol



ABSTRACT

We will probably never know the extent of female-on-male violence because even before the perpetrator ponders accusing her victim of abuse, society does so on her behalf. It would appear that a simple unfounded accusation that a man sought the comfort of another woman, is enough to blame the victim for his own injuries. Feminists argue that male violence towards women exists because society tolerates violence against women, but some feminists clearly condone violence against men. Governments should allow access to the data they collect because every citizen has a right to know the truth about violence and crime; especially when those statistics are being used to justify hatred against a group of people in that society.

Keywords: male victims, female perpetrators, domestic violence, toxic masculinity, feminism

A few weeks ago, I published an article, “Feminism: toxic masculinity,” which initially resulted in my temporary suspension from *LinkedIn*, and then went on to be read by over 11,000 people. When my articles are well read, I like to write a debrief article to discuss what I learned from writing the article, and also to capture some of the comments, which for some reason disappear over time. The two comments discussed after the article are a great indication of how readers responded to my argument.

FEMINISM: TOXIC MASCULINITY

On the 14th of June this year, a forty-six-year-old Sydney woman was charged with burning her ex-boyfriend to death last October.¹ It is alleged that she disabled the water mains, to ensure that the fire could not be put out, and then set the granny-flat at the back of the man's parent's house alight to ensure that he perished. The man died two days later from his burns, in the arms of his mother and father. Three weeks before the woman was charged, another woman had doused her male partner in gasoline and set him alight, all while their eleven-year-old son was in the next room listening to his father scream. How many women initiate violence against men? We will probably never know, because even before the female perpetrator ponders accusing her victim of being abusive to her, society is already doing it on her behalf. Even if there were no abuse, it would appear that a simple unfounded accusation that the man sought the comfort of another woman, is enough to blame the victim for his own injuries.

In the eyes of Katie Kurly, for example, if a man cheats on a woman, that's reason enough. Responding to a Facebook posting, Ms. Kurly wrote, “I’ve got \$20 that he either abused her or cheated on her. Women don’t set their husbands in fire for no reason 😊”² There is no accusation that the man did anything to deserve being set on fire, but if he had been having an affair, perhaps the woman would have been better off trying to run down her husband in her car

¹ See <https://www.news.com.au/national/nsw-act/news/sydney-woman-charged-over-fatal-house-fire/news-story/144ce2f24a6c95d682cdaafi812c5f72> and <https://thewest.com.au/news/7-news/woman-charged-over-house-fire-that-killed-ex-boyfriend-bc-579776829001>.

² Katie Kurly, *Facebook*, May 23, 2018, viewable here: <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=137830580413334&set=p.137830580413334&type=3&theater>.

because the media seems to think that's pretty amusing.³

But, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (the ABS), this violent behavior is not typical of women; it is typical of men. The ABS claims that “79% of intimate-partner homicide victims in 2012-14 were female.”⁴ This has resulted in the accusations, that men are inherently violent, that masculinity itself is toxic, and that all female violence can be explained as self-defense against a violent majority. The evidence seems irrefutable; murder is murder, there is a dead woman, and a man killed her, but as we can see from the comments of Katie Kurly, even when a man is burned alive, he has to be at fault because women don't do anything to men unless they have good reason. If the ABS are simply reporting domestic violence deaths from murder convictions, and we know that women are half as likely to be charged, and half as likely to be convicted, one could argue that these figures are not reflective of anything other than an anti-male, pro-female bias that exists, not only in the legal system, but in the wider community.⁵

Feminists argue that male violence towards women exists because society tolerates violence against women, but the comments of some feminists clearly demonstrate an acceptance of violence against men: for example, *Huffington Post* editor, Emily McCombs, desired to “band together to kill all men” as one of her new year’s resolutions for 2018; and author, Clementine Ford, has repeatedly asserted a similar imperative to “kill all men.”⁶

Recently, a grass roots Australian group calling itself *Domestic Violence Australia*, started collating news reports of domestic violence deaths, and over the past two years they have found the ABS statistics are not reflective of domestic violence deaths as a whole.⁷ Here is one of the group’s graphics:⁸

³ See, for example <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/justice-story/mercedes-madness-wife-runs-cheating-hubby-article-1.1259905>.

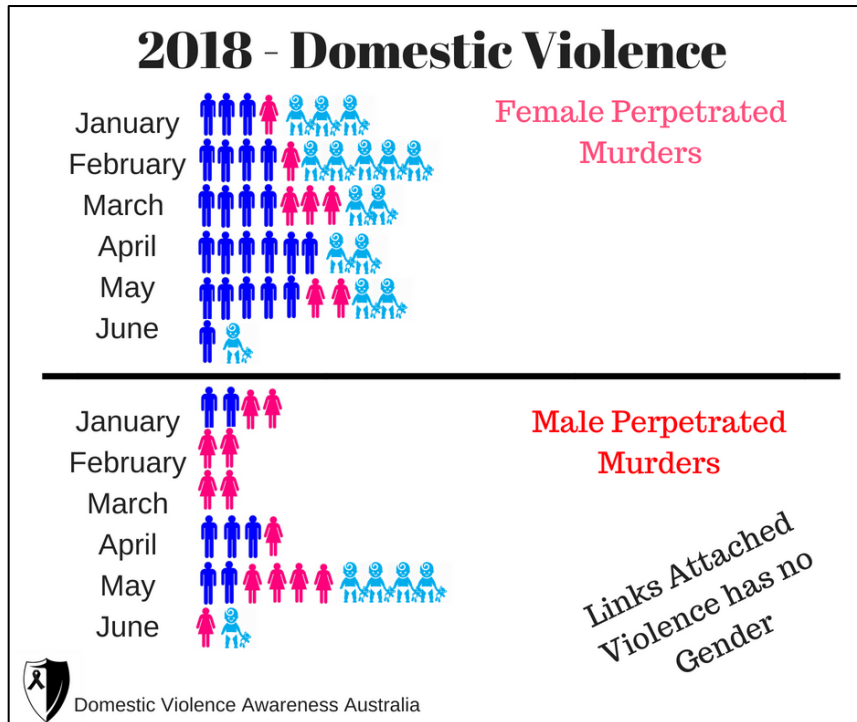
⁴ The data are presented here: <http://www.crimestats.aic.gov.au/NHMP/>.

⁵ See https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/09/11/men-women-prison-sentence-length-gender-gap_n_1874742.html.

⁶ See <https://criticathink.wordpress.com/2018/01/01/all-men-are-scum-and-must-die/>.

⁷ *Domestic Violence Australia* run an informative Facebook page that is available here: <https://www.facebook.com/domesticviolenceawarenessaustralia>.

⁸ This graphic is reproduced with the kind permission of *Domestic Violence Australia*. The original posting and



Let me explain what is going on here.

1. The ABS statistics are binary; they presume that every murdered woman was killed by a man, even though 7, of the 19 women killed this year were killed by women.
2. Children are excluded from the statistics. This year, of the 20 children killed, 75% have been killed by women; almost 1-in-3 domestic violence deaths are people below 18.
3. These statistics are based upon news reports of women being arrested for killing others. They do not reflect the possible innocence of the women (or men), or the possibility that the woman will be convicted of manslaughter, and not murder.
4. Each of the DVA deaths have a name attached to them, yet the ABS stats don't.

Unfortunately, the ABS do not publish their raw statistics so that a simple comparison can be done to determine if the DVA statistics have captured all of the reported deaths. In the

its links are available here:

<https://www.facebook.com/domesticviolenceawarenessaustralia/photos/a.1700359836858499.1073741828.170035533525596/2172688226292322/?type=3&theater>.

information age, there is no excuse for not releasing raw government data, there is no excuse for releasing manipulated data, and there is no excuse for using data that is half a decade old. Governments need to stop controlling access to the data they collect because every citizen, male and female, has a right to know the raw truth about violence and crime; especially when those statistics are being used to justify hatred against a group of people in that society. Given the negative attitudes towards men, and the positive attitudes towards women, one cannot determine that there isn't a serious legal and social bias at play here. For instance, it is unheard of for anybody to publicly suggest that a woman, who had been set on fire by a man, probably brought it upon herself because she was unfaithful; and even if someone did, society would be quick to point out that women should never be judged for infidelity. In an equitable society, we must ask ourselves whether or not, men face extreme levels of prejudice, both as victims, and accused perpetrators of violence, but instead, some in western societies are discussing their vision for a world where women are never imprisoned.⁹ Only time will tell if the women who set men on fire will be charged, convicted and imprisoned, but one thing is for certain: as a society we show no sympathy for male victims of crime. Instead, we now openly discuss masculinity as being toxic, and blame all violence, no matter who committed it, on men, based upon the belief that men have power, and exercise it through patriarchal violence.¹⁰

After all, the statistics from the above-mentioned Australian data show that men are 10 times more likely to be victims of violent crime, and that in most of those cases, it is someone else's son who commits that violence. But has it ever occurred to anybody that male violence, is a product of a society that has no real value of male life; while at the same time, highly valuing the life of every woman? In a world where male life has no value, and feminists argue that it is completely OK to hate men, would it not seem more probable that male violence is a

⁹ See, for example, the following articles: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jun/01/why-we-should-close-womens-prisons-and-treat-their-crimes-more-fairly>, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-politics/10015766/Isnt-it-time-to-abolish-most-womens-prisons.html>, and <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-13666066>.

¹⁰ This document, produced by the Swedish Government, exemplifies typical popular assumptions about patriarchal violence: <https://www.government.se/49b730/contentassets/87a9c5e22afi4395aff341bdb197f58/patriarchal-violence---an-attack-on-human-security>.

manifestation of the low status of men? Boys in Australia are dragged into school halls and lectured by feminists not to ever hit a woman; all while their female peers look up at them as perpetrators of future violence.¹¹

In such an environment, is it any wonder that the statistics collected by Domestic Violence Australia have no resemblance to the statistics published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics? Even if only one in one million perpetrators of domestic violence were women, one would think that feminists would insist that girls also be forced to pledge to never to hit a man, woman or child; but feminism is not about gender equality, it is about shaming, reputation destruction, power and control. Feminists will always defend a woman accused of violence, while condemning every man, all before the legal process has even started; the very definition of prejudice.

Neil's comment

I read this article and found myself regularly shaking my head, so I went back and read it again. I'm not going to argue with the statistics, there's no point in that, but I think I was unsettled more by the tone and assumptions in the article AND by many of the polarizing comments. There is toxicity on both sides, and those with that toxicity often have good (to them) reasons through past experience and perceived injuries.

Most women I know would call themselves feminists, pushing for equality and recognition, and do not often align with the radical activist (toxic) approach. However they do understand that real change is often only brought about by radical protest. It's a bit like voting for your government, but then not agreeing with everything they do. The greater good, if you like.

I'll say thought-provoking.

I'd like to thank Neil for the honesty of the comment he left. He says that he was unsettled by the tone of my article, by my assumptions and by my polarizing comments, but my article simply challenged the narrative that men were more violent than women. No doubt many of my readers felt like Neil and just didn't leave a comment, but my article made no claims that women were more violent than men, just that male violence is viewed through a feminist narrative of

¹¹ See https://www.buzzfeed.com/aliceworkman/white-ribbon-oath-shaming?utm_term=.pubBGBM1#.gibDAD9OO.

extreme anti-male bias.

Neil then goes to imply that feminist anti-male bias is justified in the name of female struggle. I personally find this comment very concerning, because the ends rarely justify the means.

Mikayla's comment

I agree that all life should be valued and this has become an issue. However, laws should be in place to protect women. Men have no issues being considered the “stronger” sex. There are plenty of times (while not always) women have injured/killed men in self-defense and I think that is warranted. I would agree once again that assumptions should never be made regarding this and in that—you are correct. However, there is an understanding that women may have to defend themselves against men who may be feeling particularly powerful. That is unfortunate, but I think the male gender has done a poor job throughout history in displaying themselves as gentle and self-controlled in domestic relationships. Men get excused from quite a few things that women do not, so we should start a feed about some of those next. I am not trying to argue as I can see a lot of men from this feed are feeling this way. I believe that self defense should be considered in trials, accusations, etc. I have never heard of a man killing a woman in “self-defense” and maybe that is what causes some of the bias. There are violent men and violent women, but I think you are missing the point. The woman mentioned in the article who burned her husband to death will end up in jail—unless he is found guilty of abuse—then it is up to the judge and jury. Not our opinions.

I'd also like to thank Mikayla for her comment, but I reject her position that women need special protection, because violence leaves far more than physical damage on a person. As I grew older and stronger, I might have been able to beat my mother in a fight, presuming she wasn't holding a saucepan of boiling water, a knife or an axe, but the damage is done when you go to sleep. Many men go to sleep with the fear of being assaulted while they are unconscious, and over the 31 years of my relationship with my wife, she has learned never to suddenly wake me. In the early days, when she did I would wake up fighting for my life. Domestic violence has nothing to do with how strong you are as a victim, or how weak your antagonist is as a perpetrator.

To argue that laws, regulation or policies should judge a victim or a perpetrator by their gender shows an absolute lack of understanding of domestic violence, and a complete lack of empathy for the victims of female violence. This is government funded prejudice; prejudice which is bad enough when it affects men who might have the resources to overcome it, but

prejudice that can be catastrophic for those who don't.

NOTHING NEW

My article is nothing new; in fact, an article from 1996 (22 years ago), written by John Leo from the Seattle Times debunks the feminist narrative that domestic violence is gendered: "Feminist studies of partner violence rarely ask about assaults by women, and when they do, they ask only about self-defense. Journalists, in turn, stick quite close to the feminist-approved studies for fear of being considered 'soft' on male violence. The result is badly skewed reporting of domestic violence as purely a gender issue. It isn't."¹²

Thanks to all of those who read, liked, commented and shared my article.

AUTHOR PROFILE



Gerard Nicol has 25 years of experience in enterprise storage management and data security. He welcomes any comments in relation to this article and is happy to answer any questions that you may have.

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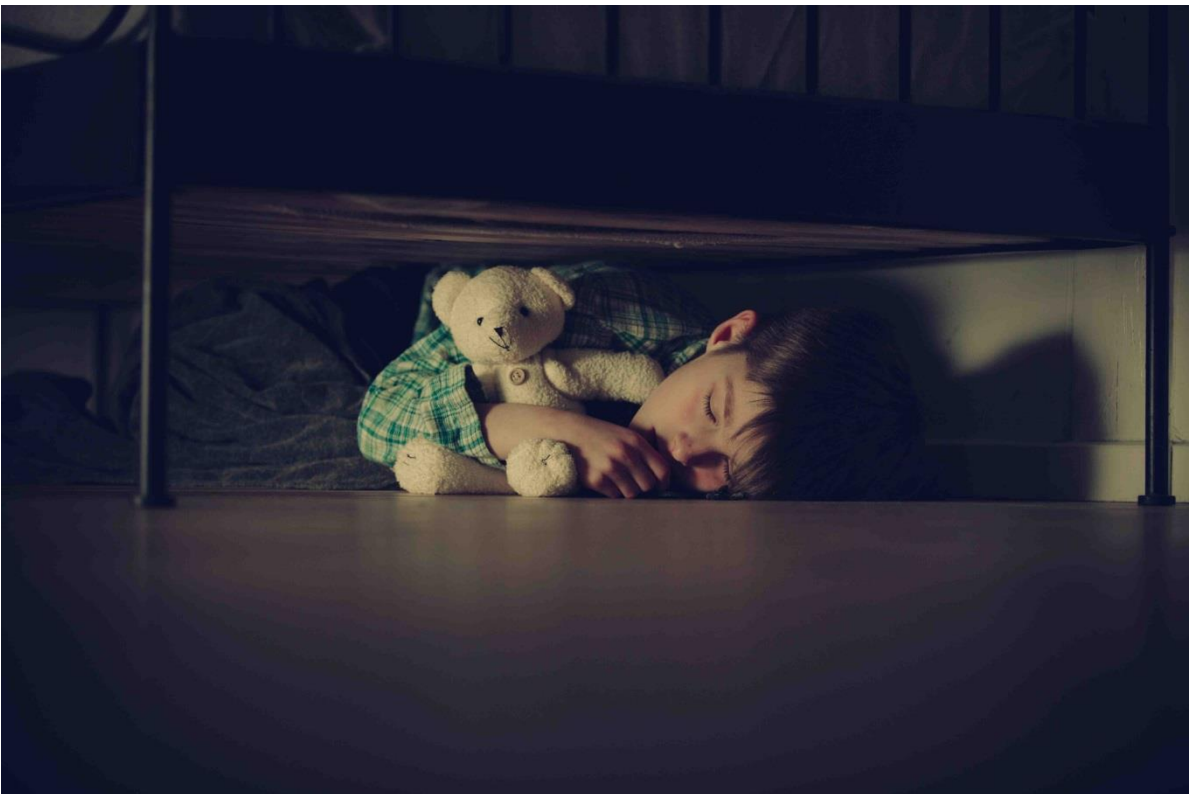
¹² John Leo, "Feminist Theory Of Violence Doesn't Stack Up To The Facts." Retrieved from <http://community.seattletimes.nwsources.com/archive/?date=19960507&slug=2327880>.

BOYISH GLIMPSES

A PHOTOGRAPHIC ESSAY

Jan H. Andersen









AUTHOR PROFILE



Jan H. Andersen is a Danish photographer, software developer, and author specializing in topics surrounding children and teenagers. With a degree in child care and with many years of experience working with troubled kids and families, he writes with passion about child psychology, boy issues and parenting. You can read more at his website

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