



Introduction to the Panel: “Time’s Up?”: The Psychodynamic Politics of Sexual Coercion and #MeToo

Virginia Goldner, Ph.D.

NYU Postdoctoral Program in Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis

In deconstructing the alchemy of sexuality, awash in its painful pleasures, these papers consider how the eros of erotic pressure can default into the trauma of sexual coercion. They also consider how, from a feminist perspective, the “personal is (still) political,” but how, from a psychoanalytic perspective, the sheer messiness of sex makes it extremely difficult to hold it to account. In sexuality, surrender and submission live in very close quarters, making “coercion” a very complex matter.

In the rhetorical combat that has been swirling around the #MeToo controversies, arguments lurch between the politicization and de-politicization of sexuality. Where one side dismisses the other as trapped in a circuitry of political correctness, the other counters that locating sex outside the social is an act of mystification that obscures the ways the oppression of women finds expression in the sexual arena. Where one side argues that talking sex asks more of language than it can deliver, that sexuality’s inherent excess – its “too-muchness” – cannot be captured by a linear metric of who-did-what-to-whom, the other side argues that feminist theory was invented for just such purposes – that “the personal is *still* political” and that we must make theory daring enough to stand up to sexuality’s taunts.

The three essays published here (this issue) focus on different aspects of #MeToo, a movement that has called for a second look at the taken-for-granted character of sexuality and of sexual coercion. #MeToo is an invitation to counter a patriarchal master narrative, according to which *nothing* (that bad) happened, with a feminist rebuke that *something* (egregious) happened. But while these essays consider this move to be necessary and critical for feminist theory and activism, they also consider the ways this position collides with an equally central – indeed foundational – psychoanalytic premise: that meaning is forever in the process of becoming, indeed, it is incessantly “killing the original truth.”

From a psychoanalytic point of view, when intimate, embodied, liminal experience gets positioned on a moral, discursive register it cannot breathe. Language cannot mentalize the unthinkable, or name what cannot be symbolized, since the sexual disrupts language and searches for a signifier through action, not words. And yet words must still be used to process, represent and morally evaluate the experience. How can we process meaning that is forever in

the process of sliding and re-arrangement, as a function of shifting self and spell states, each aligned with contradictory ideologies, all of which interpellate new meanings backdated over the old?

But these arguments notwithstanding, much of sexual coercion is enacted under just such troubled conditions of ambiguity. And while it is true that sexuality may sometimes be lived on a liminal fourth dimension, where it is immunized from morality by the press of (mutual) desire, it is also true that desire can be commandeered by all manner of malignancies, which will coopt the erotic into a traumatic register.

In deconstructing the alchemy of sexuality, awash in its painful pleasures, we are tasked with a consideration of how the eros of erotic pressure can default into the trauma of sexual coercion, how the ambiguities of consent can default into abjection, and how the “release of surrender” can collapse into the “resignation of submission” (See Ghent, 1990).

How can “Just say no” be an option, when the question at hand is “What just happened”?

The three papers presented here consider the trauma of sexual coercion, but also explore the question of how sexuality can play with, yet not default to sexual violation. They also address the challenge of representing the erotic (which exceeds language), and they explore the disciplinary aspects of the #MeToo movement (which attempts to restrict, but not to queer sexual space).

REFERENCE

- Ghent, E. (1990). Masochism, submission, surrender – Masochism as a perversion of surrender. *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, 26(1), 108–136. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00107530.1990.10746643>

CONTRIBUTOR

Virginia Goldner, Ph.D., is an Associate Editor of *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, and is the Founding Editor of *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*. She is Faculty at the NYU Post-Doctoral Program in Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis, and has taught and supervised at the Stephen A. Mitchell Center for Relational Studies, the doctoral program in clinical psychology at CUNY, as well as in many venues nationally and internationally. Her theoretical publications have focused on the relational foundations of gender and sexuality, and in particular on relational violence. She is the co-editor of two volumes of papers addressing these topics, and is completing a book collecting her major papers.