

Suffering in Silence

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“You say that you and your girlfriend fight a lot. Can you tell me more about this?”

“Well, it seems whenever I don’t do what she wants – well, there’s conflict.”

“And then what happens?”

“Sigh... it is always nasty verbally. Sometimes it gets physical.”

“I see. Can you tell me more about what you do?”

“You don’t understand... She *terrorizes* me!”

“And so you strike back?”

“I have never hit her!”

“But you said it gets physical.”

“It’s sort of embarrassing to say... she... she... she hits... *me*. She hits and screams at me.”

This is a snippet of a dialogue that occurred between me and a male patient while I was in my doctoral training, and upon reflection I am embarrassed to say that I did not recognize that this man was trying to tell me that he was being victimized by his intimate partner. Rather than mirroring the clear shame and desperation that was dripping from this man’s words, I reacted with some skepticism. He was correct. I did not understand. And from his perspective I never would as he did not return after his initial appointment.

At the time, I rationalized that he was not ready for treatment; not ready to face his issues; not ready to admit that *he* was an abuser. In retrospect, I did not make space in my narrow conceptual or sociopolitical mindset to allow for the possibility that he was indeed a victim of intimate partner violence. I silenced him, and he withdrew from me. It may have been the only option he had to protect his weakened sense of self. It was not he who was not ready... I was not ready.

Our culture seems to have considerable difficulty in accepting the possibility that men can be and frequently are the *victims* of domestic violence. This is reflected in the near lack of resources for the battered man, the treatment models that focus nearly exclusively on some alleged institutionalized sexism that allows for oppression of women in this manner, and for governmental action – legislative, judicial, and law enforcement – that focused on curbing the violence of men.

Many courageous individuals have fought long and hard to bring the reality of intimate partner violence perpetrated against women to the fore of our consciousness, with more work to be done to be sure. Yet the men who suffer at the hands of both female and male partners are offered little voice or recourse. And while both abused woman and men may feel considerable shame, society will reinforce this in the man while helping the woman to disavow it. She can find hope, healing, and freedom from abusive relationships, and he suffers in silence.

While it is hard to say exactly how many men are victimized by their intimate partners or what percentage of all abuse victims are male, estimates suggest that between one-third to one-half of domestic violence victims are male. If we accept the lower end of the estimate, then not offering services to abused men is simply a miscarriage of justice.

Entertaining these ideas has even been the source of strife within our own division, which according to our mission statement is “committed to an enhancement of men’s capacity to experience their full human potential.” While there may be many reasons for this, I would like to offer two.

Those who pioneered this division set out to establish a body of scholarship that deconstructed the ways in which the cultural expectations of men acted as a straightjacket; confining men to being less emotional or willing to express dependency and vulnerability. Others wanted to consider how to offer a deeper psychotherapy that respected the strengths and dangers of manhood. Coming from a pro-feminist position, these individuals have made significant contributions in understanding how assent to and conflict with traditional masculinity has undermined our mental health, our educational attainment, our relationships with women and other men, and apparent propensities to physical violence [to name just a few]. As we have worked toward the liberation of men to be whole persons not constricted to a single definition of masculinity, there is much owed to the social constructivist methods of feminism.

But it seems to me that at least some of the tenets of some strands of feminism are restrictive to men. Some feminists write in such a fashion that one can only conclude that men can *only* be the victimizers and oppressors, thus assuring that there is no room for men as being victims or losers themselves in a “patriarchal” world. As such, we need to be willing to turn our deconstructive lenses on our own philosophical and theoretical positions. I think that this can be painful. Yet I am convinced that part of the reason that I missed what my patient was saying was because I was blinded.

Second, it seems that we become easily polarized whenever a controversial topic comes up. In this discussion, I have been attempting to be clear that there are multiple strains of feminism and many different types of feminists. Some are very interested in true equality between men and women, and others appear to be uninterested in how men may be harmed by cultural norms or on the losing end of inequality. Clarity in who we are referring to can make all the difference toward having productive scholarly dialogues.

Inherent in this polarization is vulnerability toward dichotomous thinking: one is either pro-woman or anti-woman; pro-man or anti-man; pro-feminist or anti-feminist. While I firmly believe that the vast majority of us are pro-human, we do not always act like it. More exactly, we seem to assume that the person voicing a dissenting view *must* be one of the above while seeing the nuance in our own. Two examples seem relevant. It is not an uncommon phenomenon on the list for someone to level a charge against the dominant construction of masculinity in our culture (this at times gets called “hegemonic masculinity,” and I list it here only for clarity) to be immediately labeled by others as anti-male. It also happens with some regularity that a philosophical or policy position of a feminist organization is called into question, only to have the inquisitor labeled “anti-feminist.” This drastically limits the potential utility of any dialogue we can have.

That dichotomous thinking affected my ability to hear my patient as well. I had bought the belief that males were the victimizers and females were their victims that was preached by a few vocal members of my doctoral training faculty. Yet beyond these constructions I knew that males *could be* victimized, and I knew that females *could* victimize – and that one can be both a victim and a victimizer.

Concluding Reflections. If you had asked me at the time I saw the client discussed above, I would have told you about my own enlightenment about how socially-constructed gender norms were oppressive to women. As this brief case excerpt demonstrates, my enlightenment was my blinder as I could not see this man’s suffering as my own constructs could not make room for him. The very voice of liberation failed him.

And so it is with some of the conflict that occurs within our division and on the discussion list – our constructs sometimes do not allow us to hear the voice of men and women who do not fit. I encourage all of us to deconstruct our deconstructions... and to listen.

Epilogue: This edition of the *Bulletin* is my last as its editor. It has been my pleasure to serve you in this way, and many thanks are due to Larry Beer for getting me involved in this way. I would also like to thank Mark Stevens for his support in drafting people to make contributions. During my tenure, Marty Wong and Lizette Ojeda have also served as editors for special focus sections and several others have been gracious in their contributions. Thank you.