

The male role model. The perspective of male survivors of sexual abuse.

10th Anniversary Celebrations of MSSAT (Male Survivors of Sexual Abuse Trust)
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Werner Tschan, M.D.
University of Zurich, Switzerland
Scheuchzerstr. 21 CH-8006 Zurich

werner.tschan@wb.uzh.ch
fon +4161-331-6113



University of Zurich

Abstract

Adults are role models for juveniles. Adults cannot on the one hand wreak havoc upon juveniles and then on the other demand good behavior from them. Instead of implementing a repressive education adults need to provide healthy boundaries, which help to enable a “secure base” for juveniles.

Through their disclosure, male survivors of sexual abuse challenge contemporary predominant role models. Talking about one’s own victimisation and sharing intimacy with each other is a commitment to human relationships and helps to stop the transgenerational circle of violence.

Good role models are the basis for male responsibility and enable the vision of a well balanced life despite the atrocities we face when talking about sexual violence.

Introduction

When considering male role models and their impact on sexual abuse, two opposite aspects are currently discussed:

- Increasing the risk for violent sexual behavior
- Preventive effect through providing positive role models

Factors such as devaluing women in general and emphasis on male superiority constitute well known gender biased links which increase the likelihood for violent sexual behavior. Growing up in a violent environment, experiencing sexual abuse, lack of supportive attachment figures, all contribute to an increased risk of transgenerational sexual violence. Therefore, one can estimate that the contrary life conditions will lead to a lower risk; which in fact lead to the conceptualisation of preventive factors:

- Positive attachment experiences
- Supportive and open environment
- Positive role models available

Sexual abuse was once considered to only take place rarely. Leading Psychiatry Textbooks around 1975 estimated the incidence of incest to be one in a million. In the meantime we know better. Professionals claim to be dedicated in their work to scientific research – but most of them never

question themselves, how general awareness is influenced by what professionals never ask. The history of sexual violence, especially when males are the victims, serves as an illustrative example for this thesis. Despite clear evidence for its existence, sexual violence issues have only began "to appear on the agenda of mental health and child welfare professionals since the mid-1970s" (Finkelhor David, 1986, p.10). "Virtually all writings in the area, however, were exclusively on female victimisation. The perspective of the helping professionals had progressed from blind to one-eyed with respect to sexual abuse" (Mendel Matthew P., 1995, p.8). But still today, psychiatry tends to ignore the influence of sexual violence on the development of psychiatric disorders and on suicide. If you look at modern Psychiatric textbooks on the subject of sexual violence, you still won't find much on its impact on personal development, especially not on male victims of sexual abuse.

"A significant proportion of the responsibility for the [unawareness] of male sexual abuse must be placed on the doorstep of professionals" (Mendel M.P., 1995, p.3). Findings from the SAVI report (2002) indicate, that 42% of women and 28% of men in Irish society suffer from sexual abuse – indicating that there is not a one in hundred, or a one in ten relationship between gender, but rather an almost equal proportion. These are evidence based results, unbiased by gender discussions and still existing myths about sexual violence. A significant number of males suffer from sexual violence – it's time to talk about the issue.

The role of MSSAT

Early in the 1990s male survivors of sexual abuse began shopping for professional help. In vain – professionals refused to offer help. Men are considered to be offenders – there was no such thing as male victims. Based on their need, affected men started to build up self-help networks – after being rejected by professionals when searching for support. In Christchurch, on the morning of March 24, 1996, the MSSAT was incorporated and registered under the Charitable Trusts Act 1957, some six years after its conception as a support group. From Ian Bennett's simple need, expressed to his counsellor, to meet other men who had similar traumatic childhood experiences this organisation has grown!

During this time Mike Lew's book: "Victims no longer, men recovering from incest and other sexual child abuse" [1988] was published, giving a voice to all these survivors. This oeuvre was a landmark, and encouraged a huge number of victims to come forward with their shameful experiences. Only after starting to talk to each other they began to realise, that they are not the only ones; that it was not their fault, that they are not crazy. In the meantime MSSAT has been accepted by the New Zealand Government as the only agency in the country providing help and support for male sexual abuse survivors.

The male survivor Network provides a range of preventive aspects:

- Addressing victim/survivor issues
- Supportive environment (openness, mutual respect, non-blaming)
- Providing helpful resources
- Challenging the Justice / Correctional System
- Raising awareness of male survivor issues

Christchurch is writing history for another time – it was not only the main port of Antarctic discovery but also was the first place on earth to introduce the universal suffrage in 1893! It now has become one of the first places on earth where male sexual abuse survivor issues are addressed.

The male role model

In the preparation of this key note address I talked with my family at home as to what constitutes salient male role models here in Switzerland, or what makes a man be a man. It was my son who claimed the mountain climber on the Matterhorn to be a true hero. He then provided a drawing, and on top of the summit he placed a rescue helicopter – he obviously learned his lessons: even heroic men must face their limits. Men are supposed to be cool and never show their emotions or tears, however, when they need help it's wise to have the adequate rescue tools in place.



Dave 2007



Swiss air show, 2004

The next aspect he pointed out was the Swiss army, their air force impressed my son. However, it turned out that he remembered a particular air show by the Patrouille Swiss in which they drew a heart in the air! Male role models play a crucial role in the development of boys; not just the heroic aspects but also by the way they are treated. New Zealand currently discusses banning the smacking of children – a process which was undertaken in Europe two decades ago. Physical violence against children is never acceptable. The respect towards children plays an important aspect in the formation of role models and how human beings interact with each other. Physical violence is physical violence, whether it is committed by “pedagogic” excuses or as a result of violent behavior.

We absorb the culture in which we live. What we learn, makes us become what we are. Therefore the male role is crucial – but it is not a static concept, rather it is dynamic through its life long influence. “It is the dehumanisation of the other that is at the root of all human violence, ...” (de Zulueta, 2006). And here is the link to sexual violence, which through its destruction of self-esteem, the lack of supportive attachment experiences and the misleading creation of the self after such experiences (Fonagy 2002) has a devastating impact. It was Bowlby who stated in a paper (1988): “Human infants ... are pre-programmed to develop in a socially co-operative way; whether they do so or not depends in a high degree on how they are treated” (quoted in de Zulueta).

I feel honoured and pleased to congratulate «The MSSAT» and to bring best wishes from top-over to down under: Happy Birthday to MSSAT!!

Why? Why?

Why does society not talk about what affects almost a third of all men, which considerably affects their well-being, which significantly affects their state of health, which causes suicide, sexual violence, and other forms of abusive behavior? Who determines which values are important and what information is shared? Male survivors of sexual abuse?? Males can defend themselves; as long as they are not sexually aroused themselves they cannot be abused, males cannot be raped ... Why are these stereotypes repeated on and on, despite clear evidence to the contrary?

In a media report on September 8, 2005 (The Press, Christchurch) one could read about the rape of an 8 eight-year old school girl by a 17 year old male teenage offender. For professionals working in this field this is one of many cases they hear about. For years they know from victims' reports that at least one in four claims to be sexually traumatised by a juvenile offender. One of the first questions is always about the magnitude. However, sexual violence is not really something that is best described simply in terms of numbers. Each of these cases is a tragedy, where society fails to protect the vulnerable child – despite the CRC (Convention on the Rights of the Child, UN resolution 44/25, November 20, 1989), despite the law and the Justice System, despite all the attempts to protect vulnerable people. "Human misery is not a substance easily measured by plotting numbers on a graph" (Louise Brown, 2000, p.112). Why are juveniles committing sexual offences?

There is certainly not a simple answer. The underlying causes for sexual violence are multifactorial (Ward Tony et al. 2006), where the male role model plays a crucial aspect. The available data clearly indicates, that prevention of sexual violence must start within the teenage age group. Society is responsible for this. I often compare this with fire fighters – each individual is responsible for one's own safety, and society helps to protect what is of value to them. So what about preventing sexual violence?

A considerable number of sexual abuse cases are committed by professionals in their professional role: teachers, scout leaders, sports coaches, policeman, physicians, nurses, clergy, etc., just to name the most salient. Babysitters often take advantage of their role as well. In many cases it takes years for victims to overcome their shame and self blame and to report what really has been done to them. Here again New Zealand plays an important role among western Justice systems: the status of limitation does not protect offenders from being prosecuted in historical cases. When there is enough evidence, a case comes to court, no matter whether the abuse took place yesterday, or 25 years ago. Catholic Priest Bernard Kevin McGrath, is one of many examples, accused of sexual abuse dating back to the 1970s. He was finally found guilty of 21 charges in the biggest child-sex trial in NZ legal history (The Press, Christchurch, March 17, 2006).

According to existing law in almost all Justice Systems, the status of limitation would make it impossible to prosecute historical cases, with the effect, that we do not learn about such events. One of the challenging books on these issues is MacKinnon's oeuvre: *Women's Lives – Men's Law* (2005). Also written from a feminist perspective, it questions traditional approaches. Male victims of sexual abuse suffer from the Justice System in a way comparable to female victims.

Overcoming gender polarisation

I was surprised to see that among the audience were about the same number of women as men. It is encouraging to see that female professionals participate in a male survivor conference. Sexual violence was first addressed as an issue, where males are perpetrators, and females are victims. Professionals were not prepared to see male survivors of sexual abuse; and male survivors were often rejected from professionals working with (female) survivors. Sexual abuse affects both genders in nearly equal

proportions. Providing a vision for male survivors will also help to overcome the transgenerational circle of sexual violence; one of the major risk factors to become a sexual offender is one's own sexual traumatising (de Zulueta 2006). Offering help for victims of sexual abuse – male or female – leads to a significant reduction of sexual violence, which can only be in the interest of both genders.

Conclusion

It is amazing to participate in an process, which has a historical dimension. The male survivor network has grown up from a handful of affected men to a well-established facility. Greetings and congratulations from all over the world illustrate both the importance and the support for this approach. The message is as clear as it is simple: "You are no longer alone when you start talking in a safe environment". This is exactly what MSSAT is providing and thereby helping male survivors to overcome their devastating life experiences.

You may question yourself:

- Does MSSAT help victims/survivors?
- Does MSSAT help to stop the circle of sexual violence?
- Does MSSAT provide another male model?

The answer is a clear yes. Thank you all from the MSSAT team for the heroic work you do!

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