

A Male Perspective on Sex and Power in the Age of #MeToo

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Abstract: This paper was written in response to the #MeToo movement, but it is about the more general topic of power relations between the sexes. It is written from a male perspective. I start with a brief discussion of the #MeToo movement with a focus mainly on issues of power. In the second part of the paper I expand the discussion to encompass other areas of female power and empowerment. I wish to expand the domain of discussion about the complexities of the interactions between the genders in the realms of sex and power and to draw attention to the existence of the ways and places in which and where I believe women have a great deal of power

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#MeToo

The #MeToo movement has generated a good deal of controversy. Those who enthusiastically support it see it as promoting the empowerment of women, encouraging women who have been subjected to unwanted, offensive, or coercive sexualized behavior on the part of men, to speak up and hold the perpetrators, who have committed crimes of various degrees of seriousness ranging from rape to sexual battery, responsible for their actions.

Those on the other side who are pushing back against the #MeToo campaign are doing so for various reasons. In January 2018 more than 100 French women signed a letter, which was first published in *Le Monde* and later reprinted in the *New York Times*. They bring up two concerns: the first, that the movement encourages “an ideology that values victimization.” The second is that they see the movement as an expression of “puritanical American sexual mores.” Some quotes to give the flavor of the letter: “[they] have gone too far by publicly prosecuting private experiences, they have created a totalitarian climate. Rape is a crime, but incessant or clumsy flirting is not a crime, nor is gallantry a chauvinist aggression.” The letter encourages women: “not to feel forever traumatized” (3) by what the writers dismissed as relatively minor forms of sexual harassment (Valeriya Safronova, “Catherine Deneuve and Others Denounce the #MeToo Movement,” *New York Times*, 01/09/2018).

Other critics see the role of victim being in opposition to the highly valued attribute of agency. Here are two examples of this line of criticism—both from women who have written opinion pieces published in the *New York Times*. The first is by literary critic and novelist Daphne Merkin, who says “What happened to women’s agency? That’s what I find myself wondering, as I hear story after story of adult women who helplessly acquiesce to sexual demands. I find it especially curious given that a majority of women I know have been in situations in which men have come on to them at work or otherwise.” She goes on to say, “They have routinely said ‘I’m not interested’ or ‘get your hands off me right now’”. And they’ve taken the risk that comes with it” (“Publicly, We Say #MeToo. Privately, We Have Misgivings,” January 5, 2018).

I have a brief comment concerning power relationships in the workplace. Consider, as a hypothetical, an incident of sexual assault and/or battery; a male coworker or superior touching, grabbing, or groping a female employee in an unwanted way where there are no witnesses present. I imagine the following scene: the woman says something loudly, like “get your hands off me,” reaches for her ever present cell phone and quickly enters 911 and send. When the operator answers, “911, what is your emergency?” she replies, “Mr. X just sexually assaulted me.” She then walks over to the HR department and tells them that she is making an allegation of

sexual harassment against Mr. X. This provides some degree of protection from losing her job, because if she were let go, she could bring a civil suit against her employer for retaliation. Retaliation in response to a report of sexual harassment in the workplace is illegal, although winning such cases can be difficult. But if she won her case, her employer would be required to pay her a substantial amount of money. In addition, particularly in the current climate in American white-collar workplaces, there is a good chance that Mr. X would lose his job. This scenario would be a wonderful opportunity for the woman to demonstrate not only her personal agency, but by doing it in such a public manner, would be making a clear statement and demonstration of why it is a good idea for men to refrain from sexual harassment in the workplace.

In white-collar, and blue-collar if there's a union, workplaces right here and right now in this country, an individual woman has an enormous amount of very real power in the workplace, should she choose to use it. There is a power imbalance: a man has the power to make a woman uncomfortable and perhaps negatively impact her career—she has the power to get him fired, publicly humiliate him, and possibly totally destroy his career.

Why Do They Do It?

There are a group of social science researchers who study sexual harassment. John Pryor, an academic psychologist at Illinois State University, has developed a “likelihood to sexually harass” scale. Research using this scale has identified a lack of empathy, belief in traditional sex roles, and tendencies toward Dominance/Authoritarianism as the three personality characteristics of men who are most likely to sexually harass. Pryor adds: “If you take men who score high on this scale and put them in situations where the system suggests they can get away with it, they will do it. Impunity plays a large role” (William Wen, “What makes some men sexual harassers? Science tries to explain the creeps of the world,” *Washington Post*, December 22, 2017).

I would like to suggest another possible answer to the question of why they do it. My conjecture is that some men have a great deal of resentment and anger at being at a disadvantage in the arena of sexual power, specifically the reality that most of the time, in most situations, particularly around the initiation of the sexual relationship, it is the woman who has far more control than the man. “Incels,” males who identify themselves as “involuntarily celibate” and share their feelings and opinions about this online, are an extreme example of this. On the Incel websites there are, mostly, a good deal of undisguised hostility toward women expressed—essentially for having the power to deny them sexual access. I am suggesting that one possible source of motivation for the gropers, grabbers, and makers of unwanted sexual advances, particularly in situations in which, as Pryor's research indicates, they feel they have the upper hand and believe they have impunity, is to get revenge. They wish to turn the tables on women for the narcissistic wounds they receive when their advances are rebuffed.

Female Power

But now on to the second part of the paper—some thoughts on the nature of female power. I refer to the particular and potent power that women have in relation to heterosexual men by virtue of their sexual desirability. The power lies in a woman's being able to influence men in the service of getting them to do what she wants them to do. The means involved are sexual, enhancing desirability to stimulate male desire coupled with the ability to say no to this enhanced male desire.

The fact that women have this other kind of power that is sexually based has always been well known. An asymmetry between male direct power and female sexually-based power is that

they most often operate on opposite ends of the public/private continuum. The power of the patriarchy is public, in the open. It is strengthened by being public—it sends a message that they have the power and it would be best if one didn't try to oppose them. Female power, however, is most often effective when it is wielded in private. The image is that of the woman as the power behind the throne.

One aspect of how female sexual power is expressed and enhanced is by means of display. This is the world of clothes, fashion, high heels, makeup, beauty enhancement, weight control, dieting, and exercise in the service of making oneself desirable to the male gaze. All of these things can have other motivations such as enhancing self-esteem and promoting good health and are often presented as being motivated in this way; however, the primary appeal and goal is sexual attractiveness.

I would argue that, though women have the sexual power I've been discussing, they may or may not exercise it blatantly—and they are more generally conflicted about whether to use it at all. There are many negative connotations and associations concerning women who make use of this female sexual power—temptress, Jezebel, succubus, witch, sorceress. The view is that this power that women have is often used for unsavory ends, which usually result in bad things happening. Helen of Troy, Circe, the Sirens, harpies, and Pandora. Women who use their female power have been depicted as dangerous and malevolent; the femme fatale. Although this is an area that's ripe for the play of all sorts of misogynist fantasies and distortions from men, many women do have a great deal of ambivalence and reluctance to make use of this power.

Feminism vs. Femininism

Recall the controversy over the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) through the 1970s. The amendment read simply: "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any state on account of sex." The tenets of second wave feminism and the legacy of the civil rights movement seemed to have moved to the mainstream and initially it appeared that the amendment would become law. At first, there was a good deal of support for its passage. But then along came Phyllis Schlafly, who led an incredibly powerful movement, largely of women, who succeeded in derailing and defeating the ERA. As Schlafly and her allies saw it, there was a fundamental conflict between being a feminist and being feminine. They did not want to be treated the same as men, either in public or in private. They saw the ERA with its central tenet that women and men should be treated equally as a threat to their female power, prerogatives, and privileges—inside the world of patriarchy. These included getting preferential treatment in the courts in divorce and custody cases, receiving child support and alimony, not having to serve in the military, and in the private realm, they wanted to maintain traditional gender relation roles—from the mundane of having doors held open for them by men, not having to pay for meals in restaurants when with a male escort, to not having expectations placed on them to work outside the home and earn money. More than 52% of white women voted for Trump in the 2016 election, despite being well aware of his being a prime example of what used to be called a male chauvinist pig.

The inconvenient fact is that somewhere between many and most women in this country are complicit with what many refer to as the patriarchy. From the feminist point of view their loyalty to the patriarchy is seen as in the service of supporting traditional gender roles and what they would consider to be upholding what has become known as "traditional family values"; that nurturing children and caring for the home is what is most important, along with being content to let the man of the household be the primary financial provider.

The Power of No

A key aspect of female sexual power resides in the power to say no—or yes from time to time. At this point in the evolution of relations between the sexes, for the most part, women are in control of the sexual encounter—if it occurs or not, with who, when, where, and how. When I first wrote this statement, it seemed to me that this was obviously true. I had in mind mostly consensual sexual encounters. But several people I talked with about this, both men and women, disagreed. Their main reason for disagreeing was that they felt that quite often women are essentially coerced by men into having sex when they don't want to. They see a continuum with forcible rape on one end and threats of abandonment on the other with much in between.

The issue of consent to sexual relations has been getting much attention lately, particularly on college campuses. A thorough discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of this paper. I would just say that one way of looking at consent, or lack of it, is to say that there is yes and no but there's also maybe. There is much room for debate on what percentage of sexual encounters can be characterized as falling in between yes and no. The question of whether or not a sexual encounter was willing or unwilling is clearly central to legal proceedings involving criminal charges of rape, sexual assault, sexual abuse, or sexual harassment. From the legal point of view, as well as the great relief it would be for beleaguered college administrators dealing with campus sexual assaults and accusations thereof, it would be of great benefit for there to be well demarcated boundaries between consensual and nonconsensual, willing and unwilling, yes and no; but that's not the way things are. There will be more about this later in the paper but for now I will leave it with the contention that sexual encounters are often fraught with ambivalence, particularly on the female side.

However, I stand by the claim that for most sexual encounters, women are in control over what does or doesn't happen. Considering the totality of all heterosexual acts, both coerced and consensual, as well as everything in between, the overwhelming majority are largely female controlled. I am writing about our own culture at present, the context in which the #MeToo movement has emerged, not other cultures where practices may be quite different.

Roy Baumeister and Kathleen Vohs have presented a model for understanding sexual behavior in first world countries, which they call “sexual economics.” In this model men are seen as supplying the demand and women as supplying the product. They contend that, on average, men have a greater desire for sex than women (a conclusion supported by a great deal of empirical evidence). This makes them dependent on women for sex, and puts them at a competitive disadvantage when it comes to negotiating the parameters of sex—if, with who, when, how, and, for long term relationships, how often (“Sexual Economics: Sex as Female Resource for Social Exchange in Heterosexual Interactions,” *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, Vol. 8, No. 4, 2004, 339–363).

Speaking of sexual economics, we have a measure of the value placed on sex with women by heterosexual males, the price of an encounter with a sex worker, as determined by the marketplace. There is power in being able to command a high price for one's services. The arena of prostitution does not have firm boundaries; there are many forms of literal, never mind metaphorical, variants on the sex for money trade. Including the casting couch, exotic dancing, and part of the implicit contract in some marriages.

One could say that any business or employment situation in which a woman uses her sexual attractiveness to get or advance in a job, to make a sale, or to get more customers for her business shares something of this sex-for-money interchange.

Crime & Punishment

As in the hypothetical scenario described earlier, women can have a great deal of power over men when they are in a position to make an accusation of a sexual crime that will be heard by the powers that be. Since #MeToo, the powers' hearing seems to have improved. Historically, the most egregious example of this would be a lynching where an accusation by a white woman was sufficient enough to assure death by lynching to any black male she claimed was expressing sexual interest in her.

In the current post-#MeToo moment we are seeing punishment for the perpetrator. Men who have engaged in sexually inappropriate behavior have lost their jobs, been publicly humiliated, and, in some cases, faced criminal prosecution, partly as a result of the #MeToo movement.

The problem lies in the fact that if there is punishment without due process, there is a risk of severely punishing someone who is either wholly innocent or guilty of what an impartial observer would consider to be a minor offense. In particular, administering punishment based on accusations of a victim who insists on anonymity violates a basic doctrine of judicial fairness—that the accused has the right to know who the accuser is and to be able to question them.

On Ambivalence

So, what is the source of women's ambivalence about the use of their sexual power? One possibility is that it may well be related to the ambivalence that women have had to deal with concerning all forms of overt sexual behavior. Whether it is culturally determined, or perhaps has a hardwired, biological basis, sexual expression—particularly involving intercourse—is fraught with ambivalence for women in a way that it isn't for men. Again, speaking in generalities, men's motivation to have sex is often an unambivalently desired outcome. For women, although there may be powerful desires to engage in sexual activity at some times, there are also many reasons not to do so, from fear of pregnancy to being labeled a slut, a loose woman who is unable to say no, with all the accompanying blows to self-esteem from external, internal, or both sources that may follow from sexual encounters. Men may have performance anxiety about the sex act, but that's light stuff compared to everything a woman has to worry about.

Carol Gilligan, in her research project on the psychological development of girls, noticed that normatively there was a significant change, chiefly in the area of self-esteem, as girls approached and entered puberty. She refers to this period of early adolescence as a crossroads in women's psychological development. As she says: "For over a century the edge of adolescence has been identified as a time of heightened psychological risk for girls. Girls at this time have been observed to lose their vitality, their resilience, their immunity to depression, their sense of themselves and their character (Carol Gilligan, Lyn Mikel Brown, "Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girls' Development," *Harvard University Press*, 1992, 2).

There are, of course, many possible causes and reasons for this phenomenon, but I would suggest that dealing with sexuality is the chief culprit. Prepubescent girls can unambivalently strive to achieve and be admired in multiple areas. For some girls this includes competency in making themselves look and feel attractive in stereotypical feminine ways. But when puberty comes these same behaviors attract the sexually driven attention of their male peers, as well as

older boys, which forces the young woman to negotiate some quite complicated social interactions. These include the rules and rituals of overt and covert sexual behavior, along with a wealth of conflicting desires and the consequences of acting on them that arise when engaging in sexual activities.

For the young adolescent girl things get very complicated very fast in comparison to the way they were just a short time ago. Here is a brief sampling of what I imagine the dilemmas and conflicts heterosexual girls must deal with as they negotiate adolescence. What do you do about boys? Do you want, or should you want, to have one or more boyfriends? What are the rules, conventions, and expectations concerning dating and a relationship with a boyfriend? Then, the big one: what do I do if I go on dates or have a steady boyfriend and he makes sexual advances? Some romantic/sexual activity is expected, but how far should it go? What do you want when it comes to sex and how important is what you want in making your decisions? Where is the proper balance of power and control between you and your boyfriend about “how far to go”? Who’s in charge of making those decisions? How is what you do or don’t do going to affect your relationships with others? Not only your boyfriend, but also your parents, family, relatives, peers and your social standing and status? Also, what about your “reputation”? If you go too far, too often, too young, or with too many partners, you are at risk of being labeled a slut—not a good thing. But if you date a lot of boys that makes you popular, which is portrayed as being a good thing. This is to say nothing of the risks of pregnancy and/or STD’s.

It’s not only men like Freud who are mystified when it comes to understanding what women want; the answers can be as opaque to women as well. The answer to the question of what women want, in regard to sexual desire, can be a hard, and perhaps impossible, one to answer as it is so entwined in conflicting wishes.

Psychoanalytic Contributions

Psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic theory can be said to be about many things and has changed and evolved in many ways from the start of the 20th century until now. Freud himself went through many changes in how he viewed psychopathology and human nature. But one thing that he and his disciples remained constant about was the importance of sexuality in motivating human behavior. There is much psychoanalytic literature about the power of the mother. In relation to men, women’s power and influence and how men view women is most often seen as stemming primarily from the template that all men have, at one time, been much less powerful than, as well as highly dependent on, their mothers.

This is true on multiple levels, but I am focusing on what most often feels like something quite different. The female power role or attribute here is not that of the nurturing caretaker whose power is that of the adult in comparison to the child, but of the one who holds the power of sexual desirability. It is her ability to please and satisfy so much of what the adult heterosexual male desires; a sexual relationship with a woman and the many gratifications that can go with it that is the source of her power.

Psychoanalytic theorizing has always had what Stephen Mitchell called the developmental tilt; to give more weight to, or look for the motivational bedrock, in earlier rather than later events or processes. There is a danger of bias here, of seeing motives arising from what occurred in childhood being more central to understanding the wishes and actions of an adult than events and internally driven motives arising from adolescence onward.

Conclusion

This paper has focused on a different kind of women's empowerment in addition to the empowerment that is being encouraged by #MeToo. Like any power, female sexual power can be used for a variety of purposes, good or evil. There is nothing inherently negative about it—just as there is nothing inherently negative about direct masculine power. Female sexual power can be used to protect people and property from harm, and in the service of creating useful and valuable things, as well as the many exploitive and abusive ends to which it has been put.

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