Using Psychoanalysis to Understand #MeToo Memories

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As the #MeToo movement has gathered momentum, we've seen a proliferation of allegations of sexual harassment and sexual assault. In some instances, one or two accusations are followed by a series of others, as happened during the course of Brett Kavanaugh's Supreme Court confirmation hearings. Although Kavanaugh's supporters, including Republican senators on the Judiciary Committee, professed respect for the demeanor of his main accuser, Christine Blasey Ford, even as they dismissed the allegations of others, they also called into question the integrity of her testimony. One of the main objections was the length of time, thirty-six years, that had passed before Ford had gone public with her report of his alleged sexual assault. Why would someone who has been hurt, they wanted to know, not speak at the time the injury was inflicted? Isn't this very delay, as President Trump recently said, itself evidence that the claims are suspect? These questions are not new or specific to Kavanaugh, but they became especially urgent when a Supreme Court nomination is at stake.

Part of the disconnect in appreciating how and why allegations arise as and when they do has to do with our culture's understanding of trauma. We are accustomed to thinking about only one of the ways that trauma works. Here is the clinical definition most generally familiar: something is traumatic when it overcomes the subject's capacity to cope, and it interrupts the self's ability to absorb and process distressing or painful events. Such trauma can bring about feelings of helplessness and produce long-lasting disturbances in the subject's life. This type of trauma is understood to happen in real time; the harm itself occurs at the time of the scarring event. This is the most widely held understanding of how trauma works, but psychoanalysis offers an alternate conception of trauma: specifically about how a traumatic experience can mean quite different things for the same individual over time.

Here is a hypothetical example. Imagine you are a woman in the 1990s. Your boss, who is male and straight, is flirting with you. You try to navigate the fine line between not injuring his fragile ego and not ending up intruded upon or, worse, in some unwanted intimacy. You also don't want to risk that promotion for which you've worked so hard, or, worse, your job. He touches you. You discreetly express your unease. Maybe you were clear; maybe you weren't; maybe you should have been clearer; maybe he should have been less obtuse; maybe he wasn't obtuse but just did not give a damn. In the end, you tell yourself, it was more or less fine. You didn't love the experience, and felt uncomfortable, but he did eventually stop, so no harm done—you kept your job, you didn't feel violated. Besides, you know that women have to deal with such unwanted attention all the time, and that men will try to get what they can.

Fast forward to 2018. In this particular moment—in some parts of the world, in some areas of society—actions like the one just described are increasingly unacceptable. We find ourselves in the middle of a cultural revolution in how we think of sexual harassment and sexual assault. For a long time, such behavior was often dismissed as just "men being men." And in some circles, there was perhaps the illusion that this kind of conduct had been largely eradicated. Today, though, this behavior is being exposed, given a name, and regarded as evidence of toxic masculinity. It is seen as abuse. This shift in social norms matters. For some women, the world is changing.

But what difference does it make to an individual's experience? Isn't the experience the same over time no matter how the behavior is framed? After all, what happened happened; experience is experience. In fact, it's not necessarily the same at all. Our new understanding of past behaviors or events can rewrite *in the present* an experience you had *in the past*. Hearing stories of people standing up to inappropriate behavior by those in power, you may begin to experience your own boss's past behavior differently; you begin to wonder if you, too,

had in fact been harassed. At the time, the flirting and touching felt vaguely annoying and unsettling in a way you could not entirely understand or explain. But now, in what psychoanalysis calls the *après-coup*, that experience gains meaning with new information and external validation. The memory of the event that was perhaps not traumatizing at the time can later be understood as—and come to feel—traumatic.

"Wait," a friend might object. "When your boss touched you, yes, you were annoyed, but you weren't really all that disturbed. Why are you getting so worked up now?" You may feel offended at her objection, but you may have asked yourself the same thing: Why is this past experience suddenly a bigger deal to me? At the time, you recall, you had even felt a bit flattered. So now you are additionally burdened by a tinge of conflicted shame, as if that sense of flattery somehow diminishes—or causes—the intrusion. Still, you tell yourself, you did know then that you could have reported him, yet you did nothing. Of course, what you also knew, and what all women have known, and what your boss knew as well, was that likely nothing would come of reporting him. And you knew, too, that other women experienced similar unwelcome attention all the time—and who were you, after all, to think you deserved better than they did?

These beliefs are changing. But the cultural shift in what is deemed acceptable, and the recent increase in women holding their abusers accountable, does more than just help individuals realize that they were violated back then. For the individual woman, feeling traumatized is not simply a matter of reinterpreting what happened in the past and "choosing" to see the experience differently. This shift to seeing such behaviors as problematic does not only produce different ways of understanding the experience *ex post facto*, but can also change the very structure of your original experience to render it retroactively traumatic. Put differently, from the perspective of psychoanalysis, experience is not static. It does not simply occur in real time and remain cemented as such. Rather, something that is inscribed as a memorable but not necessarily traumatic event can become traumatic through the prism of time and later experience.

As discussed earlier, we usually think of trauma as occurring when external stimuli intervene in the subject's capacity to process events, inflicting a type of psychic scar tissue. The ego goes into overdrive, rapidly deploying the various methods by which it guards itself from an emotional overcharge (dissociation, repression, and a horde of other mechanisms intending to protect us). In such instances, the trauma happened in the moment of the event, though you might not have appreciated how impactful that event was to you at the time. You may have developed symptoms (for example, distrust toward others, or panic attacks), but even then the symptom likely feels random, without a specific source or cause you can name, and you wouldn't have necessarily connected it to your boss's original advances.

What psychoanalysts know, however, is that there is another category of psychic trauma that is not simply about the immediacy of experience. Freud, who was the first to propose this idea, theorized that some types of trauma require two events that occur at two different times. First comes the original affront, which is registered in your memory but not understood for what it is. Then, a powerful subsequent event generates a shock that can reignite the memory of the first event. At this point, the first event is run through the mesh of that more recent event, and it is revisited and experienced differently. Because of this new understanding, your very experience of the original event can alter.

Another hypothetical example to help explain this phenomenon: say, for instance, that you are five years old and it's Christmas. You call for Mommy, and she doesn't respond. You go looking for her and, entering the bathroom, you walk in on her kissing Santa Claus. You are entirely unfazed; you, too, would have kissed Santa Claus—he brings so many presents! But your mother is acting weird and seems inexplicably ruffled by your presence. You feel confused. You sense that there's something about this that escapes you, but there is nothing you can do about this elusive feeling. Its strangeness stays with you, but since you can't make sense of it the reminiscence gets tucked away in your memory as a registered mnemic trace, a mystifying, but more or less inconsequential, morsel of experience.

Or so you think. In your teens, as you are starting to learn more about sex—and, perhaps, begin having it—we can imagine a moment when you might find yourself recalling the scene you walked in on so many years before. All of a sudden, the meaning becomes obvious; *now* you understand the implications of that kiss! Of course, your mom would have been ruffled when you walked in! Of course, you wouldn't have had a clue about what was going on! But now that you understand more about what was occurring (Mommy was not simply kissing Santa in a friendly way), you make a different meaning of that original moment. Your experience of what you saw that day begins to shift, too. Your new interpretation of the event can rearrange your impression of it and the effect it had on you. This is because, as Freud put it, the memory "has only become a trauma after the event." You used to be confused and unclear; now, the knowledge that you likely walked in on your mother in a sexual moment begins to feel overwhelming. The previously insignificant details of where her hands were on

Santa's body are now saturated with sexual meaning. You now feel ashamed of having been so naive; you might even feel angry or betrayed.

This peculiar mechanism, the *après-coup,* requires two events at two different times to render the combined experience traumatic: an event *then* and an event *now*, forming what we might call the *now-then relation* (it is in the "now" that the "then" becomes traumatic). But there is another important ingredient here—and that is what intervenes between these two events. For Freud, this is puberty. The teenaged you is able to imagine that Mommy and Santa shared more than an innocent kiss because you presently have something at your disposal that you didn't previously have: instinctual sexuality. Your sexual feelings and experiences may instigate the return to the original scene. This also means that the original, innocent scene is now freighted with your understanding of your mother as a sexual being. Nothing about the observed event has changed. What's changed is the meaning you make out of what you had observed then, and it is this that creates the traumatic combustion now.

The psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche added another dimension to this Freudian understanding of trauma. For him, it is more than just puberty that can intervene in the now-then relation. In speaking about what intervenes between "then" and "now" he writes, "we are evoking not only the possibility of new physiological reactions [puberty] but, in correlation, the existence of [new] sexual ideas." What are the ideas that intervene between then—the example of the inappropriate boss in the 1990s—and now when it comes to #MeToo? The list is long: ideas about consent and boundaries; ideas about the uneasy relationship between gender and power; ideas about the ways in which power differentials can both inflame desire *and* set the stage for abuse; ideas about the fact that taking liberties with others' limits is not masculinity's prerogative but a symptom of its pathology and its fragility; and many others. These ideas are relatively new in mainstream cultural conversations, and they have been made possible by the extensive and laborious efforts of women's rights activists, anti-violence organizers, and feminist and queer academic work.

These new ideas can, through the mechanism of the *après-coup*, have a great impact on how one understands one's own sexuality and render certain experiences retroactively traumatic. What is at work here is complex: it's not that something was "planted" in the original event that could manifest later, nor does the present have the singular power to rewrite the past: the two operate together and at once. In other words, the gains in women's rights and the other cultural changes driven by the #MeToo movement may be the new "sexual ideas" that can affect your experience now of what happened then. This is how, paradoxically and perhaps against intuition, expanded freedoms can at once liberate us and make us feel the harms that have been inflicted on us.

This does not mean that your boss's offending behavior was not *de facto* problematic even then, in the 1990s. It only explains that you may not have been able to experience it as such until now. In other words, the now-then relation helps explain why back then you were merely annoyed, but now, seemingly inexplicably, you may manifest all kinds of traumatic reactions (for example, a phobia, intrusive thoughts, or somatic symptoms, and so on). Historically, people—usually women, but not exclusively—whose experiences have become retrospectively traumatic have been accused of exaggerating, misremembering, being dramatic, or—as the familiarly gendered accusation goes—hysterical. They are disbelieved by others and, often, second-guessed by themselves.

Understanding the now-then relation will not satisfy a desire for unambiguous narratives or accounts that can be simplified into 140 characters. But we must wrestle with the complexities and seeming incoherences of human experience. Having a greater understanding of the various types of psychic injuries does not detract from the seriousness of trauma that was experienced in real time. Think, for instance, of Christine Blasey Ford's harrowing testimony regarding Kavanaugh putting "his hand over my mouth to stop me from screaming." She continued, "I thought he might inadvertently kill me." This real-time trauma had immediate impact: Ford struggled academically following her sexual assault and had difficulty "forming new friendships, especially with boys," she testified. Those of us who work in the clinical trenches know that testifying about an event only to be disbelieved or disregarded can be as traumatizing as the original event itself. We may find, with time, that Ford's testimony and Kavanaugh's confirmation will have been events that cast trauma in new light.

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