
Exiled Voices: Dissociation and the “Return of the Repressed” in Women’s Narratives

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About the Author

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Abstract

What happens when women feel compelled to send their knowledge of relationships and reality into psychological exile? For over a century psychologists have documented the elusive phenomena of psychologically driven forgetting: repression and dissociation. Interested in the ways women attempt to narrate a life story when their voices have been exiled through processes of repression and dissociation, leaving significant gaps in memory, I interviewed a small sample of women. I found that these narratives were affected by two broad forms of oppression: cultural denial and lies, and physical and sexual assault. I traced a dialectic of voices in these narratives: voices of dissociation and knowing, and voices of disavowal and self-preservation. In this paper, I present the ways I heard each of these voices, and how women both concealed and revealed clinical prohibitions and possibilities.

I want to thank the women of the Stone Center—Jean Baker Miller, Irene Stiver, Jan Surrey, and Judy Jordan—for inviting me to speak. Their voices, singly and together, have become a small chorus in my mind, creating a context for women to voice what is most difficult or problematic in the psychotherapy framework and relationship. I am deeply grateful to them for all those years of brave collaboration that led

to the formulation of a relational understanding of psychotherapy.

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I. Exiled voices

Susan Griffin, in her book, *A Chorus of Stones* (1992), joins two worlds that are usually kept separate: the world of private suffering and the world of public tragedy. She creates an aesthetic of memory by carefully documenting records of personal and public horror, then imaginatively invokes the process of coming to know what has been historically denied. In the following passage, Griffin imagines a woman she has heard about but does not know, and this woman’s father, and then her mother:

Shall I call her Nelle, the woman whose name I cannot tell you? I name her after my great-aunt, who was born in Southern Illinois. . . . When I imagine her father forcing himself up a hill and into the mines, I imagine his hands trembling, as my own hands have trembled when I am overtired. And I can imagine Nelle trembling too, after her father had forced himself upon her, trembling and not knowing where to take this trembling. . . . I think right away of Nelle’s mother. When her first daughter was raped, two others had already been born. I try to become her and immediately I have a feeling for the event. I find myself gripping the edge of my desk as if the ground were shaking violently. And, as the

violence of my imagination stops, there is a kind of numbness and a kind of confusion. Things somehow have got to go on, I say to myself. And, over time, I forget why I do not let my oldest daughter come home until I am home . . . but nightmares recur. There are other daughters (pp. 36-37).

Griffin imagines the terrible interlocking of denial with the physical trembling of a single family's violence and despair. This is the real devastation of trauma: It isn't so much the rush into dissociation, or the physical violence in itself, however brutal, but the human ways we try to protect ourselves from what is so terrible to know, to imagine really. Those lies that cover over the trembling of real violence, that trembling that goes on and on, those denials that are acts of gaslighting, are deeply devastating. And the exile of knowledge and of voice, that peculiarly human capacity for complicity in denial, reaches us everywhere: in our personal suffering, in our relationships, and in our conception and practice of psychotherapy.

Women may be particularly capable of recognizing or imagining exiled voices because women's voices have been silenced privately and publicly, for so long historically. As a developmental psychologist and a clinician, I have been asking women and girls to tell me about their lives. The process of listening and responding raises questions about voices in exile, lost time and memories, voices coming to life as memories return, the sound and sense of memory in the aftermath of trauma. What happens, I wondered, when women feel compelled to send their knowledge of relationships and reality into psychological exile? How do women remember and begin to tell a life story when there are significant gaps in memory?

I am not the first person to raise these questions. For over a century clinicians have been speculating about the elusive complexity of psychologically-driven forgetting (Janet, 1890; Breuer and Freud, 1895/1955; Freud, 1905/1962; Horney, 1926; Deutsch, 1944; West, 1967; Ellenburger, 1970; Crabtree, 1986; Putnam, 1989). These discussions have focused primarily on women's symptoms and women's psychological development. When Freud renounced his seduction theory of hysteria and recast the traumatic memories of women as fantasies or wishes, he began to consider women's psychological development as an unsolvable riddle. He noticed that during adolescence girls appear to undergo "a fresh wave of repression" (Freud, 1905/1962) and to become less curious and lively than they were as children. Freud considered this wave of repression and the subsequent "passivity" of women a

natural part of maturation, an odd train of thought for a man who was so curious about "forgetting that is suspect." Freud's observation of repression in women was taken up and explored in greater detail by Karen Horney (1926) and Helene Deutsch (1944), among others. Over the course of a century, repression came to be the explanation for various psychological symptoms that were originally understood as manifestations of forgotten trauma. Although psychoanalysis arose historically as a response to "hysterical" women whose condition was emblematic of a collective malaise of women in late 19th century society and culture, in the 20th century the "talking cure" became a powerful and effective system for denying women's memories of trauma, in effect, exiling women's voices.

What happens when women feel compelled to send their knowledge of relationships and reality into psychological exile? This question can also be approached by listening to girls as they enter adolescence. My colleagues and I at the Harvard Project on Women's Psychology and Girls' Development have found evidence of repression among contemporary adolescent girls. Following girls between the ages of eleven and fifteen in longitudinal interview studies (Brown, 1989; Brown and Gilligan, 1992; Debold and Brown, 1991; Gilligan, 1990; Gilligan, Brown, and Rogers, 1990; Rogers and Gilligan, 1988; Rogers, 1993), we observed girls move from a rich relational world of childhood in which it was possible to express the full range of human feelings into a repressive time in their development. Girls then begin to feel deeply the constraining conventions of femininity that would have them narrow their feelings and modulate their voices. Preadolescent girls tell psychologically astute stories of human relationships, rendering their connections with themselves and with others in exquisite detail. A struggle breaks out in adolescence, however, when these same girls are encouraged to disconnect from their knowledge and the full range of their feelings. What girls knew in childhood seems as if it cannot be known, and what girls want to say suddenly seems unspeakable. Facing into this crisis, girls struggle to remain connected to their childhood knowledge, actively resisting repressive conventions of femininity and fighting openly for authentic relationships. During adolescence, girls also begin to actively silence themselves to protect themselves from being dismissed, denigrated, or ostracized. Their interview narratives become infused with the phrases, "I don't know" and "I can't say," the markers of an active process of repression. When their self-silencing