

Christine Künzel, Hamburg

Gender-specific coping with sexual violence

Review of

Silke Birgitta Gahleitner: *Sexuelle Gewalt und Geschlecht. Hilfen zur Traumabewältigung bei Frauen und Männern*. [Sexual Violence and Gender: Aids in Coping with Trauma for Women and Men] Gießen, Psychosozial-Verlag, 2005, 343 pp.

The title of Silke Birgitta Gahleitner's study is at first misleading, since one would expect an extensive survey of the various forms of sexual violence experienced by adult men and women and their impacts. A brief glance at the table of contents suffices, however, to resolve this misunderstanding: Gahleitner's book deals only with sexual violence perpetrated against children and its effects as well as the possibilities of coping the aftermath as an adult. The author might have reached a programmatic decision to avoid the term "sexual abuse" in the title of her book, since this phrase is inappropriate as a description of acts of sexual violence.

As Gahleitner points out in her first chapter, "abuse" is not only a "controversial term" because it suggests that "there might be a 'legitimate use' of children (19). The German Penal Code, in its definition and sanctioning of the crime of "sexual abuse of children" (§176 StGB) and "persons incapable of resisting" (§ 179 StGB) also trivializes and diminishes these acts, by framing them as less serious than "sexual assault / rape" (§ 177 StGB). All of this is linked to the problematic definition of the definition of violence within the context of the German Penal Code, as noted by one of the women interviewed by Gahleitner, who added this demand: "In the case of children, the concept of violence [...] must be defined more broadly, since they can be subjected to massive pressure, due to the extreme disparity of power" (161). In other countries—in particular in the English speaking world—such acts are referred to as "rape of a child" and categorized together with other grave crimes. Thus, Gahleitner's aversion to the term is understandable; nonetheless, a different title that would have referred more precisely to the actual content of the book and not raised expectations that it does not fulfill would have been possible.

Once this hurdle is taken, one can turn to the author's gender-sensitive text, two-thirds of which is comprised of summaries of interviews with twelve women and men—responses by six men and six women alternate to produce a most convincing account—so that individual forms of coping with sexual violence takes up a large part of the book. The study's starting point is the question of how those who become victims of sexual violence as children or youths are able to live with their experience and cope with it as constructively as possible—and what role gender plays in these processes (11f., 305).

Although one might first have the impression, after reading the twelve case studies, that there are hardly differences between the males and females with respect to the effects of sexual violence and the modes of dealing with it, this impression is misleading. Perception—both the self-perception of the victims and perception by others—is one area where differences are discernable. Whereas girls and women tend to identify with the role of the victim for cultural reasons and are therefore more frequently recognized as such, boys and men are in most cases denied this recognition as victims. Because they are not perceived as victims, their self-perception is affected, so that they cannot see themselves as the victims of sexual violence. As a result the forms of sexual violence that boys and men suffer are subject to much stronger taboos than the taboos that are in place with respect to sexual violence against girls and women (268).

Moreover, the role of mothers as the perpetrators of sexual violence also underlies a taboo. Only recently have some studies addressed the topic of females as perpetrators of sexual violence in close social relations (note 1) but this area of research is still in its infancy. Gahleitner's reports of sons who were abused and sexually assaulted by their mothers are perhaps an indication of how high the number of unreported crimes of this kind is. The unsettling account of Herr Rentsch, one of the persons interviewed for the book, is a case in point. In search of professional help, he is told by a therapist that "it is impossible for mothers to abuse their babies and toddlers" (235). He then speculates: "I sometimes really think: if a father would have acted this way towards his daughter, then people around him would have reacted in a totally different way... but in this case it didn't attract anyone's attention... it's all registered as mother love..." (234).

A convincing survey of gender-specific aspects in coping with sexual violence

By summarizing the results of each chapter in diagrams and tables, Gahleitner succeeds in providing a convincing survey of gender-specific aspects in coping with sexual violence. While both the typical first reaction of both girls and boys is dissociation or a strategy of avoidance, girls then tend more towards auto-aggressive behavior, whereas boys show a stronger tendency towards aggressive behavior (269, table). Furthermore, because of their perceptions of symptoms and the emotions that accompany them, women tend towards strategies that "lend meaning" to their experience of sexual violence but there is a danger that they have difficulties in overcoming the role of the victim and auto-aggressive behavior (272, table). Males' behavior, in contrast, is characterized by a tendency to taboo helplessness and powerlessness and deny their effects; a likely result is the identification with perpetrators and possibly a "career" as a perpetrator (ibid).

Theories of gender from the realm of cultural studies

Of special relevance for the focal point of this study is the phase of active and intense confrontation with the experience of sexual violence, which can occur with internal or external resources; according to the author this phase calls for "deconstructive integration" with respect to gender-specific coping strategies (274). In the best cases, this phase is marked by a "gender-atypical" search for behavioral strategies: for women, this means the search for instrumentality and strength, notions that traditionally have a masculine connotation; for men, this means seeking expressivity and attempts to become aware of and accept one's emotions, traits that have a feminine connotation (283, table). One of the significant merits of this study is the fact that it incorporates theories of gender from the realm of cultural studies, in particular Judith Butler's deconstructivist approach (286), which enables Gahleitner to show the extent to which gender is involved in the process of coping with the experience of sexual violence.

Whereas the divergent coping strategies of boys and girls at first seem to indicate that gender roles stagnate or are reinforced, in fact, Gahleitner asserts, constructions and deconstructions of gender prove to be "a complex phenomenon in the process of dealing with sexual violence" (282). Utilizing "opposite-sex coping strategies" leads to a "necessary flexibilization, which, after a phase of stagnation in gender-typical role patterns" opens the way for the next step (306). In examining the meaning of gender roles for dealing with the experience of sexual violence, the author succeeds in retracing sexual abuse "not as an individual fate but instead as a complex societal phenomenon (299).

How to improve the therapeutic process

Although it might appear at first glance that the study is based on an essentialist understanding of gender, Gahleitner is aware that her “model based on empirical data” is more applicable to “men and women, who continue to uphold typically male and female gender roles, than to men and women as a whole” (380). If “transsexual and intersexual interview partners” were included, then this issue might appear in a different light (308). This brings us back to the question of the book’s title; the subtitle is “Aids in coping with trauma for women and men”. Gahleitner, who worked for many years as a psychotherapist, views these aids as “suggestions for psychotherapeutic practice”. Unfortunately, treatment of this aspect in a single short chapter (chapter six, 289-303) is rather abbreviated. The author notes that her interviews with men revealed “considerable deficits in terms of aid and expert knowledge for boys and men who have experienced sexual violence” (291). Interview respondents experience with therapists would seem to indicate “a prevalence of orientations that are power-laden, fixated on theoretical perspectives, and focus on interpretation” (292), which are not useful in coping with traumatic experience. Gahleitner therefore calls for forms of psychotherapy in which 1) trauma-specific knowledge about sexual violence is taken into account in an appropriate manner; 2) the therapeutic relationship is perceived as the keystone of the therapeutic process; 3) the therapist’s actions reflect the specific persons, situations, and processes involved, rather than being oriented around specific procedures; and 4) the significance of society’s way of dealing with sexual trauma are taken into consideration (293). Unfortunately, psychologist Gahleitner does not offer more detailed suggestions on how to improve the therapeutic process. Because the book focuses on an extensive presentation of interview partners’ accounts of their individual experience, it can serve not only as a collection of case studies for therapists but also as a self-help tool for victims.

Although Gahleitner’s study leaves various questions unanswered and does not or cannot address a number of aspects, it includes numerous stimulating insights and can be viewed as a starting point for further research in the realm of trauma and gender as well as gender and sexual violence. Among potential issues for study is the question of whether gender-specific coping strategies can be found in the case of other kinds of traumatic experience (natural disasters, civil and other wars, the Holocaust, kidnappings etc.) or are linked specifically to sexual violence. One ethnologically oriented study (note 2) has indicated that gender-specific aspects would seem to play a key role in the development of coping strategies by immigrant women and men of color who have experienced xenophobic violence. Thus, we can expect to glean many new insights from future research on these questions.

Translation from German: **Paula Bradish**

1. Especially noteworthy is the work of Barbara Kavemann, which includes: “Frauen als Täterinnen – Frauen, die Mädchen und Jungen sexuell missbrauchen”, in Verena Wodtke-Werner (ed.), *Nicht wegschauen – Vom Umgang mit Sexualstraftätern*, Weinheim 1998, 31-44; “Zur Debatte um Männer als Opfer und Frauen als Täterinnen häuslicher Gewalt”, in: Frauenhauskoordination e.V. (ed.), *Sonderinfo 6 zum Aktionsplan der Bundesregierung zur Bekämpfung von Gewalt gegen Frauen*, Frankfurt/Main 2003, 52-55; and, with Ulrike Kreyssig, *Handbuch Kinder und häusliche Gewalt*, Wiesbaden 2006.

2. The study is an as yet unpublished *Magister* thesis (Berlin 2004) authored by Anna Verena Münch: *Zur Konstruktion von Angstträumen in Frankfurt (Oder). Coping-Strategien von Studierenden mit dunklerer Hautfarbe*.

Short biographical note

Christine Künzel, Dr. phil., scholar of literary and cultural studies; trained as an actress at the Schule für Schauspiel in Kiel and worked as an assistant director at a theater in Hamburg; studied German language and literature, American studies, and philosophy at the University of Hamburg and Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore (USA). From 1998 to 2001 fellowship in the school of graduate studies on “Coding violence in changing media” at Humboldt University in Berlin; 2003 completion of doctoral degree there. Lecturer at the Universities of Hamburg and Hanover since 2000. Awarded the Fritz Sack Prize of the Society for interdisciplinary criminology studies in December 2005. Special lecturer at the University of Oldenburg in 2006; guest professor at the Institute for German Language and Literature, University of Hamburg in 2006/2007. Main fields of research: representations of violence in literature (sexual violence, law, criminality, crime; literature and law; female satire and grotesques: Gisela Elsner; editor of the works of Gisela Elsner, published in German by Verbrecher Verlag, Berlin.

Recent publications: *Vergewaltigungslektüren: Zur Codierung sexueller Gewalt in Literatur und Recht*. Frankfurt a.M./New York, 2003. Ed.: *Unzucht – Notzucht – Vergewaltigung. Definitionen und Deutungen sexueller Gewalt von der Aufklärung bis heute*. Frankfurt a.M./New York, 2003. Ed. together with Jörg Schönert, *Autorinszenierungen: Autorschaft und literarisches Werk im Kontext der Medien*. Würzburg, 2007. Ed. together with Gaby Temme, *Täterinnen und/oder Opfer? Frauen in Gewaltstrukturen*. Hamburg, 2007.

Christine Künzel

Email ch.kuenzel@freenet.de

[URL http://www.slm.uni-hamburg.de/ifg2/personal/Christine_Kuenzel.html]

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