

Trauma, Victimhood and Subjectivity

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Samenvatting: In dit artikel wordt slachtofferschap geanalyseerd als een identiteitsmarkering na ervaringen van seksueel slachtofferschap. Ervaringen van slachtofferschap leiden niet noodzakelijk tot een identificatie als slachtoffer. Verwijzend naar Lacans allegorie van de roofoverval, wordt betoogd dat de constitutie van subjectiviteit in relatie tot de Ander structureel wordt voorafgegaan door een moment van slachtoffering. Het verschil tussen structurele en accidentele slachtoffering wordt dan beschreven. Om een slachtofferervaring te laten uitgroeien tot een identiteit als slachtoffer, spelen twee psychische processen een rol. Ten eerste is slachtofferschap het resultaat van een proces van symbolico-imaginaire identificatie dat wordt gevoed door hedendaagse traumadiscours en culturele representaties van slachtofferschap. Ten tweede is slachtofferschap het resultaat van een proces van identificatie met (het object van genot van) de agressor zoals beschreven door Ferenczi. Ten slotte wordt het onderscheid gemaakt tussen slachtofferschap bij het hysterische subject en bij het perverse subject. Deze twee types van slachtofferschap worden geïllustreerd aan de hand van vignetten over seksueel misbruik.

Sleutelwoorden: slachtofferschap, identificatie met de agressor, Ferenczi, allegorie van de roofoverval, perversie, hysterie

Abstract: This paper sets out to analyse victimhood as an identity marker after experiences of sexual victimization. Experiences of victimization do not necessarily entail a sense of victimhood. In reference to Lacan's allegory of the robbery, it is argued that the constitution of subjectivity in relation to the Other is structurally preceded by an instant of victimization. The difference between structural and accidental victimization is then described. For victimization to develop into victimhood, two psychic processes play a role. First, victimhood is the outcome of a process of symbolico-imaginary identification that is fed by contemporary trauma discourses and cultural representations of victimhood. Second, victimhood is the result of a process of identification with (the object of *jouissance* of) the aggressor as described by Ferenczi. Finally, a distinction is made between victimhood in the hysteric subject and in the perverse subject. These two types of victimhood are illustrated with vignettes of sexual abuse.

Keywords: victimhood, identification with the aggressor, Ferenczi, allegory of the robbery, perversion, hysteria

*In the history of the world it might even be
that there was more punishment than crime.*
Cormac McCarthy

In their acclaimed book *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood* (2009) Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman describe the steady rise of the concept of trauma as a psychological category: how it was constructed from the corresponding medical concept of bodily injury at the end of the 19th century, and became the notion of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as it is now used at a global scale. An increasing number of very diverse but all adverse human experiences – (sexual) abuse of children, natural disaster, violent crime, colonialism and racism, political repression – are all gathered under the same label: trauma. The successful dissemination of the concept of trauma is associated with a change in the moral status of victims, from suspect (for a long time into the 20th century) to legitimate. The categorisation of an experience as traumatic makes that experience absolute and undeniable. Therefore, the perspective, the concerns, the interests, the values and the expectations of the victim are also absolute and undeniable.

Fassin and Rechtman (2009) warn about this development: “while trauma is a language that appears both neutral and universal in its account of victims, it significantly fails to throw light on certain signifieds” (p. 281). By this, they mean that the signifier ‘trauma’ obliterates the diversity and complexity of experiences, the way in which they are inscribed in multiple determinations, in a collective history, in a personal trajectory, in a biographical moment. Trauma and victimhood are assumed to be self-explanatory, as if the psychic experience is the same for everyone. But it isn’t. Some victims struggle to identify themselves as the injured party, while others develop a very strong identification with a victim status. A strong investment in one’s experiences of victimization might lead to an identity structured by feelings of resentment, blaming, and (fantasies about) moralizing revenge (Brown, 1993). In such cases, the experience of victimization becomes the basis for social recognition.

The question then arises which processes play a role in the assumption of victimhood as an identity marker. The underlying political and social processes have been described from the perspective of transitional justice (Jacoby, 2015) and victimology (Rock, 2002). In this paper, I will argue that sexual victimhood needs to be understood in relation to subjectivity. Relying on Lacan’s allegory of the robbery, I will first describe the structural relation between subjectivity and victimization. Subjectivity can only come about in confrontation with the Other who lacks something. Next, I will describe two psychic processes that underlie victimhood: one consists in a symbolico-imaginary identification and the other in the development of an unconscious fantasy. Sándor Ferenczi has described the latter process very clearly in the case of childhood sexual abuse in his paper *Confusion of the tongues between the adults and the child*. I will bring together Lacan’s allegory of the robbery with Ferenczi’s concept of identification with the aggressor. Towards the end of the paper, I will distinguish and illustrate these processes in relation to a hysteric and a perverse form of victimhood.

The structural link between victimization and subjectivity

“[This] was the beginning of so many things – of social organization, of moral restrictions and of religion,” is Freud’s comment on the murder of the father by the brotherhood in the primal horde (Freud, 2001 [1913], pp. 141-142). The idea that

tension and conflict can bring forth important new developments is intrinsic to psychoanalysis. In a similar vein, the constitution of subjectivity is described by Lacan as an antagonistic process. During the 1950s, Lacan referred to the master-slave dialectic in which two individuals engage in a fight to the death that only ends 'successfully' when one of them submits to the other. By that act of submission, the master and the slave recognize each other in their respective existence and the social bond between subject and Other is established.

For the purpose of this paper, I will develop another, equally violent myth to capture the constitution of subjectivity. In Seminar XI, Lacan (2004 [1973]) presents the scene of a robbery as an allegory for the constitution of subjectivity in the field of the Other: imagine a robber meeting his victim and yelling 'Your money or your life!' (Lacan, 2004 [1973], p. 212). This scene presents an Other (the robber) who wants something from the subject (victim), but this desire is presented in the form of a forced choice. The command 'Your money or your life' gives no indication about what the robber wants. The reader might assume that the robber is really after the money, but this is already an interpretation that goes beyond the literal command. The subject in the scene (victim) will have to make that interpretation. Moreover, the choice presented by the robber is not like any other kind of choice. Most choices are either mutually exhaustive (like 'heads or tails': one has to make a choice and the outcome will be very different for each option), or equivalent (like choosing between different types of desserts: one has to make a choice but there is a gain in every option). The choice offered by the robber, however, is a different kind of choice, because whatever the victim chooses he will lose. There is no winning option. If the victim chooses to keep his money he will lose everything, because the robber will take his life and then his money. If the victim chooses to keep his life, he will lose his money and will have to live without money, which is not much of a life. So, both options result in a similar loss of the money, but one option results in an additional loss of a life (Lacan, 2006 [1966], p. 713).

Although the choice is a forced choice with no 'good' option, it is still a choice. And that is exactly the reason why it is conducive to the constitution of subjectivity. It is exactly because the Other, the robber, wants something from the subject, that the subject, the victim, can wonder what his own desire might be: do I want to keep my money or do I want to keep my life? In other words, the robber's demand 'your money or your life' initiates the process of alienation and separation. The victim is forced to engage with the robber and his desire (alienation). But in the interval between the two options (the two signifiers of money and life), small though it may be, there is some room for a choice. Lacan will call this minimal vacuum between the signifiers the gap in the Other where the desire of the subject is constituted (separation). "The Other puts me in question, it interrogates me at the very root of my desire as *a*, as cause of this desire and not as object. And because this is what the Other targets, in a temporal relation of antecedence, I can do nothing to break this hold, except to engage with it." (Lacan, 2014 [2004], p. 153). The subject is forced to engage with the robber because the robber obliges his victim to show its true colours: what is most precious to you, your life or your money?

It is important to point out that the process of alienation and separation can only emerge in confrontation with an Other who misses something, who is in want of something. This lack needs to be interpreted: what does the Other (robber) want from me (victim)? On the basis of an interpretation of the desire of the Other, the subject makes a choice to give something up for the Other, in order to try and please the Other. In that sense, the constitution of subjectivity requires the choice of making a sacrifice.

This choice constitutes the fundamental fantasy that underlies the subject's relation to the Other: it is a symbolico-imaginary fantasy about what the Other wants from the subject. The result of this choice is the psychic structure of *neurosis* (the one who chooses to be duped by the Other and gives up the object of desire), *perversion* (the one who chooses to dupe the Other by pretending to be the object of desire) and *psychosis* (the one who refuses to be duped and keeps the object in his pocket).

The allegory of the robbery refers to a structural moment, and not necessarily a real event, although it can be found at the level of unconscious fantasy. In *A child is being beaten* (2001 [1919]), Freud described the different stages of development of a masochistic fantasy in male and female patients during the Oedipal phase. Freud clarified that the fantasy is not based on real (traumatic) experiences. Although all of the patients must at one point have experienced the superior physical power of their parents, the fantasy is not linked to concrete punitive scenes or violent incidents. At the first stage, the fantasy sounds like this: "My father/mother is beating a child (that I hate)". At this stage, the fantasy is an expression of the Oedipal love for the other-sex parent who punishes the hated rival brother or sister. Then, however, punishment and love become confused and the child develops the wish for themselves to be punished by the loved parent. At this second stage, the fantasy becomes most clearly a fantasy about victimization as the child imagines "I am being beaten by my father". At the third stage, the fantasy finds its final, more generalised form and becomes invested with sexual excitation: "A child is being beaten (by a substitute for the father/mother)". This anonymous fantasy is not repressed and becomes a source of masturbatory satisfaction.

Although Freud used this clinical observation mainly to develop his theory on perversion, it can also be read as a fantasy about the constitution of subjectivity. The unfolding of the fantasy in three steps centres around the subject's interpretation of the Other's desire. In the first stage, the beating by the father is interpreted as an expression of his desire to punish the naughty child. The subject interprets this as a sign of the father's love for him, the well-behaved child. But then, the subject realises that if it is the father's desire to punish, this beating might also be considered to be an expression of love. The child also wants to be included in the desire of the father, so the fantasy becomes "I am being beaten by my father because he loves me". Lacan argued that this stage of the fantasy represents the mythical moment where the subject observes his own constitution as a subject: "in this act the subject herself is found raised to this dignity of signifying subject [...] it establishes her properly speaking as a subject with whom there can be a question of love" (Lacan, 2017 [1998], p. 265). Lacan compared the beating hand with the signifier that is marked on the subject by a strong, absolute Other. Subjectivity is thus produced when the body is hit with a signifier by the Other.

But what happens when the fantasy of the beating becomes reality? What if the structural trauma becomes accidental trauma? By accidental trauma, we mean trauma in the normal sense of the word, by which the subject suffers a real experience of victimization (Verhaeghe, 2001). For the remainder of the paper, I will focus on accidental victimization. But I will demonstrate that the theoretical framework for structural victimization can serve to understand victimhood in the case of accidental victimization.

First process: victimhood and symbolico-imaginary identification with cultural signifieds and social fantasies

The phenomenon of victimhood implies an identification with signifiers and images that are available in societal discourses about victimization. However, a symbolic identification also binds the subject to certain signifieds, especially in the case of a signifier with heavy culturally connotations. Etymologically, 'victim' is derived from the Latin *victima*, which means sacrifice or animal for sacrifice. The *victima* is sacrificed in order to satisfy the desire of some deity, the supreme Other. Dutch criminologist Jan Van Dijk (2009) found that in all Western languages the word used to refer to people that have been the target of an offence have this connotation of sacrifice and/or sacrificial object. In European languages, the word victim started to be used in the 16th and 17th century in order to refer to Jesus Christ as the 'voluntary victim' or 'expiatory victim'. It is also in the 17th century that the signifier 'victim' started to be used to refer to a person who is injured, tortured or killed by another, and this gradually developed into a general sense of passive recipient of misfortune.

It is clear that the signifier 'victim' is invested with moral and religious meanings that signify the victim's suffering as a form of atonement and purification. In the same way as Jesus, Lamb of God, had to suffer for the sins of humanity, the victim suffers for the sins of the aggressor. In that sense, it isn't surprising that for a long time in Western societies, the victim who didn't accept its fate and who wanted reparation of some sort was considered to be morally suspect (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009), as the wish for reparation implies a rejection of the moral framework of victimhood.

But this is not the only moral framework that is attached to the signifier 'victim'. In a seminal paper from 1986, Norwegian criminologist Niels Christie identified the traits of the imaginary 'ideal victim' that are most likely to result in the granting of a complete, legitimate and unambiguous victim status to someone who has been the victim of a crime:

1. the victim is weak compared to the offender – the ideal victim is probably a woman, sick, old or very young;
2. the victim acts in a virtuous manner, or (at least) has legitimate and ordinary occupations;
3. the victim is beyond reproach for what happened;
4. the victim is not related to and does not know the aggressor who committed the offense;
5. the aggressor is unequivocally big and bad.

An old woman who is robbed while she is walking through the park is more likely to think of herself (and to be recognised by others as) a victim than a man who is robbed while he is strolling around in the red-light district. A woman who is sexually assaulted by a stranger during daytime is more likely to be acknowledged as a victim than a woman who is raped by her husband. It is clear that the stereotype of the 'ideal victim' is a social fantasy and says very little about the actual experience of victimization. But this Manichean social fantasy will frame the way victims think of themselves. The signifieds about sacrifice, atonement through suffering, innocence, purity, and passivity seep into the way a victim experiences victimhood and the way he or she thinks about him- or herself and the aggressor.

Unsurprisingly, many victims reject the signifier as they refuse to be chained to its cultural meaning. In advocacy groups for victimized women and children, a narrative about surviving and survivors has emerged to counter the associated meaning of passivity and forgiveness. For some, this signifier seems to usefully support them on a path to overcome their hardship. Van Dijk (2009) analysed autobiographical accounts of eleven high-profile victims and he found that many of them actively tried to redefine

and renegotiate the meaning of the victim label. For instance, Natascha Kampusch, the high-profile victim of a kidnapping in Vienna that lasted for eight years, said in an interview with a British newspaper: “I am not a victim simply because other people say I am. Other people cannot make you a victim, you can only do that yourself [...] I want to be taken seriously and for the events of my case not be swept under the doormat” (Van Dijk, 2009, p. 2).

Second process: victimhood and the identification with (the object of *jouissance* of) the aggressor

Victimhood is not only an identification with cultural signifieds or social fantasy, it is also a position in relation to the Other. The complex psychological dynamics between victim and aggressor in the case of sexual abuse is described with great accuracy by Hungarian psychoanalyst Sándor Ferenczi in *Confusion of tongues between adults and the child: The language of tenderness and of passion*. In a talk given at the 12th international psychoanalytic conference at Wiesbaden in 1932, he described the typical pattern of interactions between victim and aggressor of intra-familial sexual abuse (Ferenczi, 2002 [1932]). A child and a person of trust engage in playful interactions and the excitement becomes erotic in nature. From the child’s perspective, the play is innocent and tender, but the adult ‘misunderstands’ the tender gestures of the child and reacts in a sexual and abusive way. The child’s first reaction is refusal, hate, disgust and violent resistance. However, often this immediate reaction is inhibited by an intense fear.¹ The child feels physically and morally overpowered as their personality is not yet robust enough to protest against the power and authority of an adult. “The same anxiety, however, if it reaches a certain maximum, compels them to subordinate themselves like automata to the will of the aggressor, to divine each one of his desires and to gratify these; completely oblivious of themselves they identify themselves with the aggressor.” (Ferenczi, 2002 [1932], p. 162)

What Ferenczi described as the process of identification with the aggressor in the context of child abuse is very different from the Anna Freudian imaginary identification with the image of the aggressor.² Ferenczi described a process of symbolic identification through which the victim’s subjectivity is defined on the grounds of an interpretation of the aggressor’s desire. After the victim has identified with the aggressor, the wishes of the aggressor become internalised demands. Within this interpersonal dynamic, the aggressor becomes the victim’s claimant, to such a degree that the victim feels obliged towards the aggressor. This state of moral confusion is often very difficult to understand for people who are not directly involved (and for the victims themselves for that matter).

¹ Later studies have demonstrated that the first reaction in the victims of sexual abuse is not always the one described here by Ferenczi. See for instance the case of Vanessa Springora later in this paper. Ferenczi seems to discount the role of retroactive processes (*Nachträglichkeit*).

² In 1936, Anna Freud described ‘identification with the aggressor’ as a mechanism of defence in her book *Das Ich und die Abwehrmechanismen*. Her description is based on observations with children in school. For instance, a child that accidentally got hit on the head by one of the teachers during a game, returned the next day in full armour including pistol and sword. He makes himself big, strong and manly to be able to do to others what has been done to him. For Anna Freud, identification with the aggressor is a means to defend against the anxious experience of victimization through imitation of behaviour: the victim emulates the perpetrator in order to do to others what has been done to him or her. From a Lacanian perspective, this identification with the aggressor is an imaginary identification with the other.

According to Ferenczi, this initial experience is the starting point of an interpersonal pattern that will repeat itself in other relationships. In that sense, identification with the aggressor only leads to further victimization: as the victim identifies with the aggressor, he or she starts to see him- or herself through the eyes of the aggressor.³ These children, as they grow up, will enter new (power) relations with a similar focus on finding out all wishes in the dominant party: what do they want from me? Ferenczi noticed in his own clinical work that these patients behaved very docile towards him. They “have an exceedingly refined sensitivity for the wishes, tendencies, whims, sympathies and antipathies of their analyst, even if the analyst is completely unaware of this sensitivity.” (Ferenczi, 2002 [1932], p. 158). In other words, they identified with him, the psychoanalyst, and tried to behave in accordance with Ferenczi’s conscious and unconscious wishes. The victimized subject becomes hypersensitive to the desire of the Other.

This poses particular challenges for the victim’s own desire. The trauma victim is stuck in an internalized power-relation on the grounds of its preoccupation with the question “What does the Other (the aggressor) want from me?” without being able to formulate the question “What do I want?”. The subject’s desire might become impossible to express in relation to the Other, as was found by Van Nieuwenhove and Meganck (2020) in their comparison of three case studies of complex trauma. In Chiriaco’s (2012) terms, the traumatized subject’s desire is ‘struck by lightning’ and annihilated by the Other.

The subjectivity of the victim only exists in relation to this absolute Other who becomes the guarantor of the subject’s existence. This symbolic identification with the aggressor means that the dynamics of interpersonal recognition between subject and Other pass through submission and sacrifice, as the subject finds confirmation of its existence only when it reduces itself masochistically to the object of the Other’s lack. The specific way in which the subject will relate to the lack of the Other, however, will depend on their psychic structure. I will illustrate this dynamic with a vignette of hysteria and perversion.

Perversion and victimhood

Perversion and neurosis are characterised by a different response to the Other’s desire. In terms of the allegory of the robbery, the pervert subject is the victim that disavows the robber’s demand: “you ask for my money but actually you want the pleasure of taking my life”. The pervert subject is convinced that the robber wants nothing but him, that he is the robber’s object of *jouissance*. The object *a* here becomes the object-cause of the robber’s *jouissance*. The hysteric subject, on the other hand, is the victim that concludes that the robber asks for one thing but actually wants something else beyond his literal demand. The object *a* here becomes an elusive and metonymic object cause of the robber’s desire.

Let me illustrate this with a clinical example of a man with a perverse subject structure that I met many times over the course of his treatment in an inpatient treatment unit for sex offenders in Belgium (for a full case study, see Gunst, Willemsen, Desmet, Watson, Loeys, & Vanhooren, 2019). The patient, whom I will call Kevin, had a long

³ The Anna Freudian identification with the aggressor, on the other hand, helps to break a cycle of repeated victimization. The earlier mentioned example of the child in full armour demonstrates that the child-victim has learned from the adult-perpetrator by imitation: by putting on his armour and by bringing his weapons, the child aims to prevent further victimization.

history of emotional, physical and sexual abuse starting at the age of 12. He started sexually abusing other children at the age of 13, and he molested several children aged between 4 and 10. I interviewed Kevin several times throughout the course of his treatment with the aim of understanding the therapy process from his point of view.

Through the interviews, I got to understand that Kevin not only suffered from the earlier-mentioned 'macro-victimizations,' but he continued to suffer from a steady stream of 'micro-victimizations'. At least, that is how he perceived many of the interactions with staff members and other patients. He constantly felt unheard and rejected, which made him feel wronged and humiliated: the other patients didn't want to listen to him and the staff didn't understand him. This tendency to experience the therapeutic relation as a power struggle has been described as a typical element in perverse transference (Willemsen, Inslegers, Meganck, Geerardyn, Desmet, & Vanheule, 2015). Kevin often became very upset about frictional situations and misunderstandings. He was very controlling towards his environment and he positioned himself as the defender of the rules, reminding everybody else about the institutional rules and agreements.

It seemed that Kevin continuously felt badly treated, as if he continued to be victimized as he had been in early life. In my interpretation, this tendency to position himself as the victim in relation to others is indicative of an identification with the aggressor: he puts himself in the position of the Other's object of *jouissance*. Kevin had the tendency to reduce himself to the object of *jouissance* of the Other, but then complained about this experience as being humiliating. To illustrate this further, I have selected four moments from the interviews in which Kevin described a real or imagined scene in which he identifies with the role of victim.

Vignette 1. Kevin: "I also have the feeling that I was a victim and I made victims. Yes, I am a link in a chain that is connected with several chains. If I had broken that link, there would have been less chains. Because, in all, I have made several victims. Imagine that two of these victims proceed to make new victims, then I have made even more victims. Because these victims will indirectly be my victims too. Yeah, that hurts."

I was struck by this link-in-a-chain metaphor because it says several important things about how he looks at himself. Through this metaphor, Kevin seems to express a sense of guilt and responsibility about the impact of his actions on the lives of the people he abused. Kevin is aware of the idea that victims can turn into offenders, as is described in Widom's (1989) theory of the 'cycle of violence'. Kevin feels responsible for the potential future victims of his victims. However, more than a real sense of responsibility, this vignette expresses how Kevin situates himself in a lineage of victims: his victims are bound to him as the links of a chain. Therefore, I interpret the vignette as an expression of his feeling of having an unbreakable connection with other victims. This feeling of connectedness is in sharp contrast to Kevin's difficulty to establish a relation with other people in general. As I mentioned earlier, Kevin suffered deeply from feelings of being unheard and rejected by others, and he had broken away from most of his family members. He could only feel a genuine connection, however, with other victims.

Vignette 2. Kevin becomes friends with another patient who also had a rough childhood involving experiences of sexual abuse. Kevin feels understood by this person and he uses this metaphor to describe their relation: "If you bring together two people who experienced the holocaust, their conversation would be much more interesting than a conversation between a person from the holocaust and a professor who knows the

holocaust only from books. It's a massive difference. And that is what I feel in relation to other clients."

The Holocaust functions as a privileged signifier in our culture to denote absolute victimhood. By comparing himself with a Holocaust survivor he is massively endorsing his victim status. At the same time, he expresses something specific about his relation to the Other. On the one hand, he refers to his friend who understands him and in whom he can confide because they supposedly share a similar history of victimization. Kevin and this other client find each other in the locus of the Other, as objects of *jouissance* of an abusive Other. On the other hand, Kevin refers to a professor who only has knowledge from books. This is of course a reference to me, the interviewer, who can never really understand him. This professor is an outsider who doesn't belong to that same locus of the Other. It is not unusual for trauma victims to feel cut-off from the world and to have difficulties making contact with others (Van der Kolk, 2015). Their social world is radically divided into an in-group of fellow victims and an out-group of people who remain alien. That explains the success of veteran organisations, trauma survivor networks and peer support groups. It seems like they can more easily find a shared language as they all relate to a similar traumatic Other. But the function of these social groups will depend on the subject structure of each individual participant.

Vignette 3. Kevin had a nightmare: "In my dream, I was fleeing together with my victim [i.e., one of the children Kevin abused] from a serial-torturer, someone who tortured all my friends. My best friend already lost an arm, blood was dripping from his face. A scary dream indeed! Messages were written in blood on the walls. Unlike what one would expect, my friend was standing straight, even though he was wounded and bleeding. He said to me very calmly: 'Kevin, you know what you should do. Keep quiet, just do it and everything will be ok. Believe in yourself.' I kept on running away."

The staging of this dream resembles the typical horror movie with cut off limbs and blood on the walls. I am struck by two aspects of this dream. First, Kevin situates himself in the dream on the side of the victims, as one of the people that are being persecuted by the serial-torturer. In reality, Kevin is as much a victim as an aggressor. Second, the dream introduced a new figure of the Other that is now implicated in the dual relation between victim-aggressor: the trusted friend, who urges him to act. Kevin had always been confused about the fact that he hadn't been able to stop the sexual abuse he suffered as a child. He was haunted by the question who's *jouissance* was involved in the scene of sexual abuse: had he himself also wanted this to happen? The fact that he had an erection at the time of the abuse was very confusing to him in this respect. In the dream, the friend urged Kevin to resist the aggressor. As a consequence of the therapeutic work on this dream, Kevin decided for the first time to press charges against the person who had abused him as a child. This was an important step in his treatment.

Vignette 4. A few days after his release from the treatment unit, I interviewed Kevin in his new home. During the interview, he referred to one of the key moments very early on in the treatment. Kevin had to present his crime cycle during relapse prevention therapy. The purpose of this task is for the patient to discuss the proximal factors that contributed to the commission of the sexual offence. In Kevin's case, these proximal factors are feelings of loneliness and rejection, and alcohol and drug abuse. Kevin took this task very serious and he presented a matter-of-fact account of his offences, without any minimalizations or rationalizations. In CBT-terms, he did a perfect job. However, afterwards, the other clients noted that they had heard a very honest but also very detached and impersonal summary of the offences. One patient

told him: “I don’t see YOU in this?”. The patient meant that he had not heard the person behind the offender. At first, Kevin was upset about this feedback: he had expected praise, as he had done exactly what was requested. However, after the completion of the treatment, he realized how important this question had been. It made him think of himself as more than an offender. In my opinion, this question opened the door to the question of his subjectivity: “if I am not that (an offender), then what am I?”. To me, this excerpt illustrates how the perverse subject is also a subject in the symbolic order and can put into question his lack of being (Willemsen et al., 2015).

Hysteria and victimhood

A remarkable book published in early 2020 started an intense public debate in France about the way sexual abuse is dealt with by justice, health services, media, the literary world, and society as a whole. The book is the account by Vanessa Springora of her relationship at the age of 14 with paedophile writer Gabriel Matzneff who was then 50 years old. Gabriel Matzneff is a well-known French author who has been publishing explicit accounts of his pedosexual experiences, including child prostitution, since the 1970s. His work never triggered any robust juridical action and he continued to receive literary prizes until a few years ago. In *Le Consentement*, Vanessa Springora gives a subtle account of her relation with Gabriel Matzneff, from the moment they first met until the painful termination of the relation.

The book describes a relationship that lasted for about one year, and that was both sexually and emotionally very intense for both parties. Vanessa Springora, who at the time lived alone with her mother in Paris, was seduced by Gabriel Matzneff. Her need for a fatherly presence, his ability to make her feel special, her emerging sexuality as a teenager, and his aura of a celebrated writer created sufficient conditions for this relationship to develop.

During the relationship, there were moments that Vanessa Springora realised that something was not quite right about it. This was also pointed out (often in a very nasty and accusatory way) by people who became aware of what was going on. But these reactions only made this rebellious teenager entrench deeper into her ‘special bond’ with the writer. The fantasy of her being the object cause of his desire seemed to have clouded her judgment. Things started to change when she read his books and discovered disgusting descriptions of his involvement in child prostitution in Manila. Doubts about the authenticity of his affections started to emerge. Vanessa Springora gradually realised that Gabriel Matzneff was not interested in her as a person, but only in her as a sexual object and as a character for his next book. The confrontation of being reduced to an object of *jouissance*, rather than being an object of desire, made her feel betrayed by him. A sense of victimization cropped up.

For a very long time, she struggled to see herself as a victim, as she felt bound by her own consent: “how to admit that one has been abused, when one cannot deny having consented?” (Springora, 2020, p. 163; my translation). For a long time, she felt guilty and complicit, as if she was also a monster. This state of confusion continued for years. In the years after she ended this relation, the moral masochism reached a summit: a period of psychic suffering, anorexia, vagrancy, and risky behaviour followed. This is a period in which she could see herself only in the way Gabriel Matzneff saw her: an object at the service of the Other’s *jouissance*. Even as a young adult, she remained for a long time stuck in this position: “as soon as someone pronounces the name of G. in my presence, I freeze and become again the adolescent that I was when I met him. I

will be fourteen for life.” (Springora, 2020, p. 184; my translation) I take this experience of being stuck at a certain age, time or place as indicative of the fact that an identification with the object of *jouissance* of the aggressor has taken place.

But *Le Consentement* is not the story of someone who remained stuck in the position of victimhood. Vanessa Springora started to see herself as a victim when she read Gabriel Matzneff’s account of their relationship, in which he portrayed himself as the libertine converted into a saint, a pervert healed through their relationship, and her as the traitor who wouldn’t believe him. She knew that this was manifestly incorrect. The realization that his way of depicting their relation was a grotesque fantasy helped her to gain some confidence in her own perspective on that episode of her life. Moreover, she started to play a role in the desire of someone else, her future husband. And she went to see a psychoanalyst.

Through a number of legal actions, she tried to limit Gabriel Matzneff’s unauthorised appropriation of her image, her story, her life in his oeuvre. As this more or less failed, she decided to write her own account of what happened. Vanessa Springora had always had the ambition of becoming a writer, and with the publication of her book *Le Consentement*, she found a signifier that is better suited than ‘victim’: the one of *écrivaine*. With her book, she gave a literary response to Gabriel Matzneff’s oeuvre: in opposition to the perverse fantasy that imbues his oeuvre, Vanessa Springora placed a corrective account about what kind of man this is. For her it was a way to “become the subject of her own history again” (Springora, 2020, p 202; my translation). For France as a whole, it is a way to come out of a state of collective moral confusion.

On January 15th 2020, an edition of *La Grande Librairie*, the literary talk show on France 5, was devoted to Vanessa Springora and her book. Vanessa Springora explained that feeling a victim was a step in the process she went through. She stopped using that word because she didn't feel victimized anymore. She clarified that her intention with writing the book was to unearth the truth, name things, shed light on “a violence without a name” (Springora, 2020, p. 131; my translation). *Le Consentement* illustrates that the process of symbolization, as it is conceived in psychoanalysis, is not an impersonal process of naming things, but that it can only work if it knits together body and symbol, lived experience and words. The signifier ‘victim’ was helpful at some point in time and to some degree, but Vanessa Springora felt a need to find better words.

Conclusion

Both Vanessa Springora and Kevin demonstrate that the moving away from victimhood requires the taking up of a special kind of responsibility. In laymen terms, responsibility is about attributing an act to a subject and putting that subject in a position to answer for this action. In the legal domain, it is ultimately the judge who puts the subject in this position, and responsibility is then understood as a matter of guilt and punishment. In psychoanalysis, a unique concept of responsibility has been developed on the basis of the theory of the unconscious. On the final pages of *The Interpretation of Dreams* (2001 [1900]), Freud points out that the subject is responsible for his dreams. Responsibility here means attributing the dream-wish to the subject and giving the subject the opportunity to speak to his dream-wish.

The Freudian take on responsibility is not about making the subject punishable for his unconscious desires, but about making the subject speak to them. The Other cannot force this type of responsibility upon the subject, it is only the subject itself who

can reach this point. Responsibility then consists in trying to tackle the question how one responded to the allegorical robber when he hollered “Your money or your life!” How did one interpret the Other’s desire and what are the consequences of this interpretation? It is obvious, however, that the very nature of trauma, this breach of psychic integrity, the hole in the symbolic (Chiriaco, 2012) can make it more difficult for the subject to respond. But as the Other is never whole and there is always a (minimal) vacuum between the signifiers, it is possible to find one’s own language to respond. This is the work that happens in the treatment process. Furthermore, the capacity to speak to the unconscious is determined by the underlying subject structure.

Hysteric victimhood is a partial victimhood because the hysteric subject at some level always recognizes the lack in relation to its symbolic identity (“I am never entirely what I claim to be”) and because the question of the Other’s desire always remains unanswered in the hysteric subject (“what did the aggressor really want from me?”). The hysteric subject wants to be the object cause of (unsatisfied) desire in the Other but refuses to be the object of the Other’s *jouissance*. In the context of victimization, the hysterical subject will try to find meaning in something beyond the aggressor’s *jouissance*, something that cannot be captured in an object. The Other might be an aggressor, but what desire is really driving him or her? It is the question of the Other’s desire that drives the hysteric’s interpretation about victimization. Subsequently, this gives the hysteric subject the possibility to confront its own desire. That is exactly what Vanessa Springora has achieved in her autobiographical book. This kind of responsibility, as an after-the-fact response from the subject involved, is not about stopping the crime from happening or preventing future crimes. It is about constituting subjectivity outside of the hold of the aggressor’s desire by returning to the questions “Who am I?” and “What do I want?”.

Perverse victimhood, on the other hand, presents itself as complete victimhood because the perverse subject disavows the lack in relation to his symbolic identity (“I know that I can never entirely be what I claim to be, but all the same...”) and because the question of the Other’s desire is answered positively by the perverse subject (“I know what the aggressor really wanted from me”). In pervert victimhood, responsibility in the sense of speaking to one’s unconscious desire is less obvious. A study of eleven psychoanalytic case studies of perversion demonstrated that the perverse subject can address an analyst, most likely because of depression, hopelessness and/or anxiety due to social isolation (Willemsen et al., 2015). Most of the eleven cases studied were patients who sensed that their perversion had something to do with their relational, professional or other interpersonal problems. There is a wish to be heard, to be recognized, to engage with others, just as there is for the neurotic subject. This is also what we found in Kevin’s vignette 4. Perverse subjects are subjects in the symbolic order and can be brought to recognize their own lack at the level of desire (“I don’t know my own desire”). However, the pervert subject pretends to have full knowledge and certainty about *jouissance*: he claims to know how the Other enjoys. This is the challenge in their treatment. The treatment should try to foster the pervert subject’s ability to desire so as to “limit the pervert’s excessive *jouissance* and enable the pervert to reclaim his body and subjectivity from the Other” (Swales, 2012, p. 240). This is the kind of responsibility that is within reach for the perverse subject: a questioning of himself, of his motives. As the role of object *a* is relinquished, one can expect that depression, anxiety, isolation diminish and interpersonal relations and general life improve. Several case studies (Willemsen et al., 2015) demonstrate that the perverse subject can gain some degree of freedom from the tendency to position itself as the Other’s object of *jouissance*, although never as a structural change.

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