

Conceptions  
of  
Postwar  
German Masculinity

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# Masculinity and Sexual Abuse in Postwar German Society

Klaus-Jürgen Bruder

## I. INTRODUCTION

Sexual abuse, or rather the discussion of it, affects our image of masculinity. In 94.7 percent of all cases of sexual abuse, the sexually abused interviewee names a man as the violator.<sup>1</sup> This is a fact that males must confront. How do they do this?

Discussion of sexual abuse in the public media invites men over and over again to negotiate this confrontation through the defense mechanism of splitting: the violator is excluded from male society by being declared a "monster." The media reports instances of sexual abuse almost every day, and in these reports, the violating man appears almost invariably as a stranger, someone unknown to the victim whom he treacherously attacks, a "sex gangster," a "beast." This propensity toward splitting is likewise expressed by demands voiced in the media for the castration of the perpetrator, if not for the death penalty itself.

The defense mechanism of splitting is becoming less convincing, however. More and more often, the press must report cases of child sexual abuse by fathers or other family members: the extensive trials of Flachslanden and Worms, Germany, in which entire family clans (including the grandmother!) have been accused, are examples. At the trial of Worms, which began on November 24, 1994, in the district court of Mainz, the parents of five children and a sixty-four-year-old grandmother were accused of orally, anally, and vaginally raping their children and two more children not their own, over a period of eight months. The children ranged in age from six months to eight years. The parents were further accused of lending their children to strangers for a fee. Trials against other alleged violators, including uncles and aunts, were

held separately. At Worms, in June 1997, the accused were acquitted. (In the charge of child abuse, the prosecutors had focused on the "sex ring" that could never be proved, while the actual abuse within the family never became a subject of the charge). At Flachslanden, in October 1994, the ten accused—mother, father, uncle, and friends of the family—were sentenced from three and a half to ten years for the abuse of nine children, the youngest two years old, over a period of more than one and a half years. In both cases, the accused were part of the lower middle class.

Ascribing sexual abuse to the lower classes, a popular way of splitting societal outrages, flagrantly denies its actual occurrence in all social classes. In the above case, however, the media's splitting of the violator from the violation was attempted by questioning the status of the father: "Can he still be called a father?" asked *Bild*, one of Germany's most popular boulevard newspapers.<sup>2</sup> Thus sexual abuse by the father was vehemently presented to the public, while sexual abuse by other family members, above all, by the mothers, sisters, aunts, and other adults outside of the extended family, remained underexposed.

The feminist answer to the question of whether the abuser can still be called a father is that he can. *Väter als Täter* (Fathers as perpetrators) is the title of a book by Barbara Kavemann and Ingrid Lohstöter, two who have considerably influenced the discussion of sexual abuse in the Federal Republic of Germany.<sup>3</sup> Kavemann and Lohstöter take as their point of departure the belief that in the majority of cases it is the father who sexually abuses his children, and consequently, being a father and being an abuser do not rule each other out.

In Peter Wetzel's first representative interviews with victims in Germany, the image of the father or stranger as sole perpetrator is substantially corrected, however. In only 27 percent of all cases were family members identified as the violators. Sixty-nine percent of the offenders were known to the child. In addition to the 27 percent of violators who were family members, 42 percent were acquaintances from outside the immediate family circle. The number of offenders unknown to the victim, that is, strangers, was around 25 percent. It can be concluded, therefore, that the two images most often invoked in public discussion—the unknown monster and the father as violator—are untenable, the invention of fantasies. What is true is the fact that in an overwhelming majority of cases, the violator can be found among the child's acquaintances, and almost all of the violators are men. But if the questions are addressed differently, that is, not in the form of questionnaires intended for representative sections of the population, but if the actual victims themselves are asked, and if, furthermore, the most severely in-

jured and/or traumatized victims are selected, then we find a significantly higher percentage of victims sexually abused by family members, a higher percentage of women as violators, and a higher percentage of male victims.<sup>4</sup>

What is the reason for this discrepancy? Wetzels, coauthor of the questionnaire, notes that in order to properly evaluate such representative questionnaires, the following must be taken into consideration: (1) specific groups often appear underrepresented in a representative sample survey, especially those in which a certain prevalence of victims may be assumed, such as drug addicts, prostitutes, prison inmates, and institutionalized individuals; and (2) incidents occurring before the victim has reached age three are vulnerable to childhood amnesia and consequently do not appear on retrospective questionnaires. Furthermore, it is essential to add that representative questionnaires do not take into consideration those processes that specifically aid the victim in assimilating the experience of abuse, which in turn lead the victim to stop talking about experienced violations: these processes are first and foremost repression and splitting. As a result, studies relying upon questionnaires have only limited validity with respect to their representation of the actual extent of sexual abuse, as well as to the percentages of family and other groups as violators. Moreover, it can be assumed that the actual extent of sexual abuse, the percentage of violators from the immediate family, the percentage of abused men, and the percentage of female violators are higher than representative questionnaire studies suggest. This has consequences for the discussion of (1) sexual abuse as an expression of masculine violence and (2) the relationship between sexual abuse and masculinity.

When we are compelled to realize that boys also are the victims of sexual abuse and that women also are capable of sexually abusing children, we will no longer be able to characterize sexual abuse as an expression of masculine violence against females. We will instead be obliged to admit that children of both sexes are sexually abused by adults of both sexes; that sexual abuse is, as such, a behavior not exclusive to men, and not directed solely toward girls; and that sexual abuse is an expression of violence emanating from adults (or adolescents) and directed toward children. We have only recently recognized the existence of the sexual abuse of boys, and only very lately realized that women—mothers, aunts, sisters, and female educators—may also sexually abuse (their) children. These facts are slowly entering the public consciousness, which shows that these well-kept secrets contradict socially acceptable ideas and images of motherhood and challenge images of the father, who, as a "man," is more readily placed in the category of "violation."

## II. SEXUALIZATION OF THE MOTHER-SON RELATIONSHIP

We know nothing of the actual statistical extent of sexual abuse by women in Germany. Published figures speak only for the extent to which we are aware of the abuse, and here, the numbers are on the rise. In a study conducted by the psychologist Craig Allen, two interesting results were found, however. Generally, women—whether they are abusive or not—have a higher threshold of perception concerning abuse than men. That is, there are things women do not recognize as abuse, but men do. In addition, women who have sexually abused their children are much less likely than men to admit to their abusive actions (30 percent of abusive women, compared to 47 percent of abusive men).<sup>5</sup> Could it be that the preponderance of male sexual offenders is an artifact of the greater denial of women?

A study by Gerhard Amendt sheds light on this very question.<sup>6</sup> In the spring of 1992, Amendt surveyed 903 women on their attitudes toward both their sons' bodily hygiene and their sons' sexuality in relation to shame and abuse. Amendt did not pose questions about sexual abuse as such, but rather about possible boundary violations that could immediately precede the actual abuse. The question of why sexual abuse by women of their sons is rarely spoken about was answered by 4.1 percent of those surveyed with, "Mothers do not abuse their sons," whereas 64.5 percent said, "They do it much less often," and 35 percent stated that, "Mothers do it differently." "When women are asked to describe the difference between paternal and maternal boundary violations," he writes, "they give violence and pain great importance."<sup>7</sup> This understanding, however, does not take into consideration "the emotional effect that sexual stimulation has on the child, who is unable to cope with it."<sup>8</sup> In the mother's imagination, the absence of violence "becomes proof of mutual desire."<sup>9</sup> Males, on the other hand, cannot reconcile the experience of being seduced with their sense of self-worth. They therefore deny such experiences. Feelings of shame, awakened within them by women who violated boundaries with them, "make it difficult for them to remember."<sup>10</sup> They would much rather "believe they provoked the mother's desire themselves."<sup>11</sup>

Further, when the boy is too "small" for his mother's wishes, he will be continually wounded. Shame results from his desire to be "big" when he is in fact too "small." He senses that he is too small for the mother's expectations and desires, yet he is unable to see that this skewed perspective comes from the mother. How do women perceive the son's smallness

and his attempts to be bigger than he can? First, women underestimate the son's abilities and overlook the son's desire for independence. Second, women overestimate the son's capabilities, and they burden the son with expectations and wishes that the son would like to fulfill, but by which he is overwhelmed.<sup>12</sup>

Amendt has concluded that, "Women make their sons ashamed; and they are unable to recognize it."<sup>13</sup> It is a very painful experience for the son to have his feelings of shame overlooked. He experiences this as powerlessness and as an inability to exist independently from his mother. How often do women overlook the son's expressed feelings of shame? To the question, "When your son is ashamed, do you overlook it?" 26.1 percent answered with "quite possibly." If this number is compared to the mere 14.5 percent who answered affirmatively the question, "Do you think it is possible that your son will at some point regard as seduction what you only did in meaning well?" then the discrepancy between the mother's self-perception and her perception of the son's feelings becomes obvious. Amendt interprets this disparity as an indication of the mother's self-deception; the mother idealizes the relationship with the son:

What causes shame in the son creates closeness in the mother, one that she has the power to determine. By denying her son's shame, the woman allows herself a vast array of well-meant care. She creates for herself the opportunity to practice sexual incursions "shamelessly." She can assert her own needs under the cover of nurture without being aware of the sexual content of her actions.<sup>14</sup>

He continues, "Most inappropriate relationships with children exist under the veil of modern parenting as (nonviolent) encroachments on the children's intimacy."<sup>15</sup> There exists a "wide range of 'inappropriate' care, training in cleanliness, as well as moments of playing and cuddling."<sup>16</sup> Through this, the mother views the son's penis as an "early object of endless motherly care."<sup>17</sup> Amendt learned that many of the mothers were still washing the genitals of twelve-year-old sons.<sup>18</sup>

Compared to 58.9 percent of the mothers who are so concerned with the son's penis, the interest mothers have in the daughter's genitals seems strikingly smaller (21.8 percent). One of the mothers' preoccupations with the penis is the "narrowing of the foreskin," the normal state in which a boy is born.<sup>19</sup> In spite of this, more than a few mothers resort to preventative measures (against the feared medical operation, circumcision); in some cases, these measures, which Amendt compares to the

widening of the girl's labia, persist until the son is twelve years old.<sup>20</sup> In addition, only 57.3 percent of the women who were concerned had actually consulted a doctor.<sup>21</sup> "If one further considers that only 20.3 percent of the women consult their male partners, it becomes clear that women are concerned with the fantasy world of the son's penis as well as their own possibly exclusive occupation with it."<sup>22</sup> Moreover, "The 'disease' phimosis permits certain actions to become acceptable; ones which women could otherwise not justify."<sup>23</sup> That is, the manipulation of the penis through this conduct (phimosis) is explained as an action of careful nursing.

"There are mothers who have difficulties with touching the son's penis," the survey continued. "What are or were your experiences concerning this?" "Touching his penis is feeling-neutral," answered 62.2 percent of the women. In the process of neutralizing feelings through playfulness, however, repressed feelings become barely perceivable. As Amendt observes: "In the group that insisted on the normality of touching the penis, some of the violence that women do to themselves and their sons when they deny their feelings becomes evident."<sup>24</sup> The mothers maintain that touching the son's penis is "feeling-neutral." By doing so, they commit violence toward themselves through the denial of feelings and perpetrate in the same moment violence toward the son, for whom touching is just as unlikely to be neutral. One can assume that the son perceives such treatment as sexual stimulation. Likewise, there is just as little ground for saying that women also would be unaffected by such sexual stimulation. When feelings are subjugated, there exists a likelihood that the relationship itself will be sexualized. What appears as genuine concern is, in essence, an inappropriate relationship, one that leads to the sexualization of the relationship between the woman and the son in small, barely perceptible steps. On the level of emotion, this is an action of secret mutual arousal and at the same time an external, rigid denial of this arousal.<sup>25</sup> As such, an incestuous element can gradually be introduced into the relationship. This is not a sudden injection of the incestuous into the mother-son relationship but rather a slow and gradual insertion. There is no line at which one action suddenly takes on a different emotional quality.<sup>26</sup> The denial of the double-sidedness of feelings, as well as the fiction of being able to dissolve those feelings through neutrality, offers no security against seductive actions. Splitting offers no protection for the woman or the son; it merely makes the explosive element invisible.<sup>27</sup> Further, the longer the stimulation of the genitals occurs, the more the son will become an actively participating partner, which will in turn lead to feelings of shame and guilt.<sup>28</sup>

The mother's actions toward the son, camouflaged as motherly care, may manifest themselves in the adult male as a disturbance in male sexual identity and may eventually lead to an inability to enter into relationships.<sup>29</sup> Cultural disinterest in the inappropriate actions of the mother must be paralyzing for the boy. The boy finds no understanding for his situation, no recognition, and no language in which he may express himself and be understood. An "inability to cry and to show feelings" may have its basis in this.<sup>30</sup>

### III. MALE BOUNDARY VIOLATIONS AND DENIAL OF CONTROL AND RESPONSIBILITY

Men do not possess the same self-understood contact with the child that women do. For this reason, men often cannot integrate their abuse into their care for the child. Rather, they must justify their care for the child, as they must likewise justify their unmediated access to the child. Men must make excuses for what remains open to women without question: unmediated access to the child, physical contact, caring for intimate parts of the child's body, and so on. Consequently, men transgress a boundary with the child before each abuse. They approach the child from without; this is their unique situation, and the conspicuousness of the abusive element is grounded in this distinction.

Women are able to integrate and conceal their sexual abuse in their actions of care; for men, this is not as easily accomplished. Physical closeness to the child is not as self-evident for men, and they are therefore threatened with appearing to have committed a boundary violation, which they then must justify. Male (abusive) boundary violation is much more obvious, which explains the special precautions men take to preserve secrecy and, as a consequence, the justifications themselves. Through their excuses, one sees the specifically male element of sexual abuse: men justify their abuse with arguments that fall back upon masculine possibilities grounded in the division of roles within the family, and for this reason their arguments even emphasize that which is not self-evident. Men justify their abuse: (1) as "sex education," as an aspect of fatherly care; (2) as a special "love" relationship; (3) with the fact that their partner rejected them; and (4) by stating that they were so intoxicated that they no longer knew what they were doing.

Men deny too—women have always known this. It is not through denial, however, that they distinguish themselves from women, but rather through the difference in their denial. As a first step, both men

