

Psychiatry: Suppressed screams upholding a patriarchal status quo?

Susan Horley was forcibly committed to a psychiatric hospital by her husband when she pleaded with him to stop beating her.

Years after she was released, Horley got a chance to look at her files: "There was no reference to the violence my husband used against me. They tried to tell me I had chosen to be abused; that if I didn't remember that, I must really be ill."

Horley was told she was suffering from 'maladaptiveness'. "The way I dressed, the fact I wore pants instead of skirts, that I didn't wear makeup, that I was a vegetarian — all of it was seen as evidence I was mentally disturbed," she recalled. "I got out because I knew I had to play their game; to be considered sane, I had to adapt to a very sexist conception of what women are supposed to be like in society."

Irit Shimrat's father took her to a psychiatrist after she told him she could make the traffic lights change just by thinking about it. "The doctor asked me to sign myself in, and not knowing any better, I did," she says. Shimrat was incarcerated and heavily drugged at different times during the next two years. She finally escaped.

Carol Stubbs had four children by the time she was 21. She was also a full-time university student. When she had a miscarriage, a nervous breakdown soon followed. "I landed in a psychiatric ward where I was given about 86 shock treatments within three months," she says, adding that she was also put on 'regressive therapy' which "put me back to the level of a five or six year old." When Stubbs went home to visit her family, she didn't recognize her children. Whole periods of her life are now permanently missing from her memory.

Susan Arbridge (not her real name) says she was 12 when "they started imposing psychiatry on me." A student saw her writing a will in class and told the teacher. Alarmed, the teacher sent Arbridge to the school psychiatrist. At first her 'treatment' consisted of anti-psychotic or neuroleptic drugs and tranquillizers. Then she was committed to a children's psychiatric research hospital in London, Ontario

where she stayed until she managed to get out when she was 16. Her dependency on prescribed drugs continued "until I managed to stop them on my own."

Jeanne Jenns became very depressed after the birth of her sixth child. She had no one to turn to — her husband was never home, and she had little time for friends considering the heavy burden of childraising and housekeeping she bore. When she didn't come out of her depression, her doctor prescribed her valium. It didn't help, and after a year of depression, her doctor sent her to a psychiatrist who then committed her to a psychiatric hospital so she could be 'treated' with electroshock.

"My weight dropped 50 or 60 pounds and I lost part of my memory." The electroshock treatment soon stopped, but the drugs continued and Jenns, who is now 57 and living in Toronto, has been in and out of psychiatric hospitals and clinics ever since. "Psychiatric treatment just made me more ill. Who goes to the doctor to get sick?" she asks. "They never tell you what's wrong with you, or help you sort out your problems. They drug you silent instead of saying 'go home and get rid of that bastard'."

These women all have three things in common: They are victims of psychiatry, and what they say is its inherent misogyny; they are willing to speak out about it; and unlike many women who have been through similar 'cures', they are well enough to talk about their experiences.

They all agree that the mental health system and psychiatric practice are institutionally sexist — that, if anything, the function of both is to 'cure' women by reinforcing the rigid sex stereotyping that is oppressing them even when they are 'well'.

The mistaken premise of psychiatry, they say, is that society as it is presently organized is seen to be inherently good and that the individual who doesn't fit in, or refuses to, is inherently sick. Following that logic, all women who refuse to be and thus challenge what they see to be a sick society, are deemed sick by psychiatrists for

woman using the pseudonym "Jillian" in the winter, 1985 issue of *Phoenix Rising*, a Toronto-based magazine produced by ex-psychiatric patients. "I was also told not to talk about it because 'it only increased my anxiety.' The fantasy that it was a delusion was based on an interview with my father, a breach of confidentiality, and an example of how psychiatry upholds patriarchy."

Louise Bowie, a counsellor for women at Ottawa's Centretown Community Health Centre and formerly a psychiatric nurse, says this sort of blame-the-victim ideology is a regular feature of psychiatry, which dates back to Freud and his theories of penis envy.

"One in three women is sexually abused in her lifetime and I've worked with enough victims of sexual abuse to know that the actual damage done is had enough," says Bowie, but "what I find shocking, are psychiatrists who tell an incest victim she's imagined the entire thing. Imagine what she must feel. And when her family breaks up as a result, the girl thinks it's her fault. Often the guilt is enough to drive someone crazy."

Jillian goes on to write in *Phoenix Rising* that most psychiatrists "show horror and start writing very busily, if one expresses any desire to change society, much less her own immediate situation. It is considered, at best, a phenomenon of misguided youth, and at worst, a delusion of grandeur." The assumption, she writes, is that the patient doesn't know society's 'rules' well enough and must be taught, by whatever means, to change her behaviour. "That the rules are wrong is never considered."

To make women 'stick by the rules' and resign themselves to their social situation, psychiatric treatment often relies on the forcible administration of so many drugs that women become numb — unable to change their situation; unable to even care — or so much voltage that their memories are permanently lost or damaged, not to mention their intellectual or creative abilities.

...there "is no such thing as mental illness..."

not seeing, as they do, that society is really healthy. Thus, to cure these women is to make them fit into the system that hurts them and probably caused their nervous breakdowns, depression, and 'hysteria' to begin with.

"I was told I was a 'schizophrenic' because I had a 'delusion' that my father molested me," wrote an anonymous

Jessica Mayberly (not her real name), who has been psychiatrically hospitalized 15 times in the last seven years after being diagnosed as "psychotically depressed" when her daughter was born, thinks psychiatry is a form of "social control".

"The hospital system is set up to give you the message that you should fit into your proper role; that the family must be

By Melinda Wittstock
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