

news

False memory speaker attacked

MONTREAL (CUP) — Protesters at McGill University shouted down a visiting lecturer whose theories suggest that childhood sexual abuse may be falsely diagnosed by psychiatrists.

Harold Leif of the University of Pennsylvania was to speak about false memory syndrome, a controversial theory which indicates that therapists can sometimes falsely attribute adult behaviour to childhood sexual abuse.

Leif is the founder of the False Memory Syndrome Foundation (FMSF) and says memories of sexual abuse need to be proven with hard evidence.

"In the absence of external evidence and the absence of corroboration, there is no proof that a memory or a set of memories — that occur in an adult sometimes 30 to 40 years after the alleged event — took place," Leif said. "There are many therapists who treat people on the basis of recovered memories without external corroboration and this is malpractice, pure and simple."

But protesters denounced the lecture, part of a weekend conference on

false memory syndrome organized by the Montreal General Hospital.

"Would you invite the KKK to speak at McGill?" shouted one audience member.

McGill's dean of medicine, Richard Cruess, answered, "That is not the issue here." Cruess said the protesters were denying Leif's right to free speech.

Several community groups demanded the conference be cancelled

"You are in fact suppressing an idea," he shouted.

Leif said that he does not deny that incest occurs, rather that he is questioning the malpractice of therapists.

"It is people with small minds who are intent about disrupting this meeting," he said. "I am the last one who has to hear this nonsense from you."

Despite Psychiatry dept. chair Gilbert Pinard's offer to hold a 15-minute rebuttal period following Lief's presentation, the protesters continued to disrupt the lecture until he left the stage.

The entire conference was met with protest. Several community groups wrote letters and postcards to the organizers, demanding that the conference be cancelled or a debate be incorporated into it.

According to Concordia psychology professor Campbell Perry, false memory syndrome is the result of therapists blaming various commonplace symptoms on childhood sexual abuse.

"Often it is very blatant," he said. "Within minutes of seeing the therapist, [the therapist says], well, you're a bulimic and in my experience that's due to sexual abuse in early childhood."

But protestors at the conference said there is no hard evidence supporting false memory syndrome.

"The four to five thousand members of FMSF have no more than their

own claim to validate their perspective," said Connie Kristiansen, associate professor of psychology at Carleton University.

And other psychiatrists argue that Leif does not deserve a scientific platform because his statements are not empirical.

Women's groups and psychiatrists say many members of the False Memory Syndrome Foundation are adults who have been accused of sexual abuse by their children. They say that for sex abusers who no longer have a strong

case using the defence of consent in court, FMS is a perfect escape route.

Perry agrees that FMS is used in court, saying psychiatrists in the United States have used it as a defence and won.

"The main aim of the foundation is to give people the legal advice they need," Perry said.

Women's groups and psychiatrists fear women and children who are sexually abused will be reluctant to come forward if there is such a strong defence in court.

Science undemocratic

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making sweeping statements, and paying more attention to diversity amongst women, are other characteristics of 'feminist science'.

"The attention given [by feminists] to the linking of women and nature [in sexist science], ...the increasing sensitivity to gendered imagery... and to the sexual connotations of the desire to dominate nature... and to 'extract her secrets', blew open... the history of the philosophy of science," says McNeil.

According to McNeil, the first steps toward making science more representative of the needs of all humanity include questioning value neutrality. This is the assumption that scientists and scientific methods are unbiased — the foundation of much scientific research.

The experiences of women and other minorities at the hands of Western science disprove the value neutrality assumption, which, according to

McNeil, "blinkers scientists more than it guides them." It fails to allow scientists to see how experience impacts on the research questions posed, and how the answers to those questions impact on others' lives.

So, says McNeil, we must make science more representative of humanity. This means that women must be recognized as part of the scientific community. She goes further to say that everybody is part of the scientific community if science and technology are serious about benefitting everybody.

As an example of how the average person could become more active in their scientific community, McNeil points to the recent consultation between breast cancer survivors and breast cancer researchers. Such consultations force researchers to explain and justify their research in real-world rather than technical terms.

In concluding, McNeil encouraged everybody to recognize that we have a right to have scientific information

communicated understandably to us. In this way we can assist scientists in ensuring that science and technology become truly democratic.

Anthony Roberts, a women's studies major, said that the lecture was "Good stuff." Roberts, who has also completed a degree in chemistry, agrees with McNeil that, "Yes, the questions that are being asked in science are often from a male gaze and they are often denying gender, as well as race and racism, and issues of socioeconomic class."

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