

Ideological State Apparatuses and Me: An Educational Autobiography

By Elizabeth Weiss

Advocates' Forum

Abstract

This reflective essay analyzes the gross mishandling of intimate partner violence and sexual violence within my school. It draws on Marxist and feminist conceptions of labor, gender, and sexuality, and primarily Althusser's concept of the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). It connects personal experience to the dominant ideologies of our capitalist society, ideologies that perpetuate the exploitation and subordination of women.

To truly love ourselves, we must treat our stories with respect, but not allow them to have a stranglehold on us, so that we free our mutable present and beckoning future from the past

—Sharon Salzberg, *Real Love: The Art of Mindful Connection*

From the ages of 16 to 19 I was in an abusive relationship. My abuser, who I will refer to as D, continued to harass me into my mid-20s. Each story of sexual harassment and abuse that surfaces is coupled with those who are close to the accused, insisting that they had no idea that their coworker/husband/son/brother/lover/friend was capable of such behaviors. In my experience, many adults knew well that I was experiencing Intimate Partner Violence (IPV). My parents knew. His parents knew. My therapist, our teachers, various coaches, school administrators, and our peers. They all knew. Nonetheless, after college he won a seat in the Wisconsin State Senate drawing on the support of many of our childhood

friends. As the #TimesUp and #Metoo movements have brought to light the pervasive violence against women, reflecting on my own abuse at the hands of someone who is now in politics has become an almost daily preoccupation.

For a long time, I struggled to feel safe in school. My friends became frustrated with my relationship, and I became increasingly isolated. When something would happen during the school day, I had nowhere to turn. This feeling of social isolation led to feelings of shame and insecurity that bled into my personal and professional life long after the relationship had ended. It greatly impacted my future feelings of safety within relationships, schools, and work. I write this as a white, queer, middle-class woman with a professional degree and the hopes of using my story and experience to find clarity and meaning making of a messy and violent experience. I draw from Marxist and feminist conceptions of education, labor, gender, and sexuality in conjunction with Althusser's (1971) concept of the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) to better understand the gross mishandling of IPV within my school community. In the end I will show how these policies and practices were reflective of the dominant ideology of a capitalist system that relies on the exploitation and subordination of women. I will conclude by proposing implications for social work practice and the importance of lifting up communities of color and LGBTQ folks in conversations of IPV, sexual harassment, and sexual violence.

Reproduction

Schools are socially constructed systems that either grant or prevent access to resources in the form of skills, social and cultural capital, and opportunities that aid in the reproduction of American "society" (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Bourdieu, 1980). What we learn in school greatly varies depending on individuals and the contexts in which they are situated. Bowles and Gintis (1976) provide a Marxist analysis of schooling in the United States and highlight how school curriculums and behavioral norms are highly correlated with the

socio-economic status of the students that the schools serve. They found that students were matched with a curriculum that taught them the knowledge and habits that would allow them to seamlessly transition to the layer of the workforce befitting their class status—what is made available to students, the limitations presented to them in schools, mirror and normalize the “minimal possibilities for advancement” and “inferior job situations” once they enter into the labor market (p. 132).

These limitations and minimal possibilities are not merely articulated, but rely on the students’ internalization of the social relations expressed in them. Education is, therefore, essentially the transmission of “a system of dispositions” that enmeshes students in existing alignments of social capital, race, and gender. Student aspirations come to match their perceived competencies (Bourdieu, 1980; Bowles & Gintis, 1976). As Davies (1983) points out, the sexual division of labor is crucial to capitalism (p. 42). Given that women have historically been restricted to child bearing, domestic labor, and their ability serve the needs of the nuclear family, this division has clear implications for their access to education and the job market, and arguably how women behave in romantic relationships.

Research has shown that between 30 and 50 percent of teens experience IPV, as victims, perpetrators, or both (Banyard, Cross, 2008; O’Keeffe et al. 1986). Yet, IPV, which includes psychological, physical, and sexual abuse, is still often treated as an anomaly. The effects of IPV are similar to other forms of trauma: higher rates of depression, PTSD, substance use disorders, and physical health symptoms correlated with exposure to toxic stress. In a study of teen IPV, victimization was correlated with lower feelings of school attachment, which was defined as enjoyment, perceived fairness of the rules, thoughts of dropping out, and the value placed on the education being received (Campbell, 2002). The same study speculated that the students’ grades and drop-out rates were mediated by higher rates of substance use and depression among victims. Despite the high rates of IPV and its dire effects,

when I was in high school, there were, to the best of my knowledge, few to no resources for teens to learn about healthy relationships or sexuality. Whether it be through the poor school policy or the cascading effects of trauma, operating under these assumptions, the experience of IPV appears to be functioning as a tracking mechanism that inhibits the educational attainment of young girls, in turn impacting their future access to the job market.

The "Silent Noise" of the Ideological State Apparatuses

In his article "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)" Althusser (1971) explores the ways social conditions—the pre-conditions of labor power—are shaped through ideology. He draws a distinction between the repressive tools of the state and the dispersed, institutional settings that shape consciousness. In contrast to state apparatuses (e.g. the military) which control first by violence and second by ideology, he argues Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA), like schools, control the conditions of production through subjugating individuals to the ruling-class ideologies. Whereas state apparatuses are unified through a central government, ISAs are decentralized and manifold. They exist in our media, religious spaces, and cultural expressions: "cramming every 'citizen' with daily doses of nationalism, chauvinism, liberalism, moralism," racism and sexism (Althusser 1971, p. 11).

Althusser argues that the pervasiveness of the messaging renders the noise of the ISAs "silent." As echoed by Bowles and Gintis (1976), Althusser argues that the private internalization of ideology unconsciously controls the will and behavior of individuals and their relations to the means of production. A recent survey by Stop Street Harassment and the UC San Diego Center on Gender Equity and Health found that in their lifetime 81% of women and 40% of men experience sexual harassment, assault, or both (Kearl, 2018). The survey showed that a majority of individuals report that these acts occur in public spaces or institutions like schools (K-12) or the workplace and that 57% of women reported that the first rates of

incidence occurred between the ages of 0-17 (Kearl, 2018). These acts are so prevalent and so public that they become normalized, or as Althusser argues “silent,” which perhaps offers us insight into why many people are shocked when an individual speaks out against these acts.

As we struggle to provide relevant education to young people on sex, relationships, and consent in public schools, young people are navigating sexual harassment and sexual violence in environments that are at best unresponsive to their needs at very young ages (CDC 2014 in Planned Parenthood, n.d.) and, at worst, hostile to their victimization. I have certainly heard the label “slut” thrown at women who choose to come forward with their experiences of sexual violence. Their sexual histories are used against them, as if being raped is just the by-product of choosing to be sexually active. In high school, I remember several girls in my grade coming forward at times with accusations of rape and recall the messaging among my peer groups to have been rather callous and dismissive. On one occasion, a student chose to leave school after she came forward; the school environment became extremely hostile towards her. I wish I could say that I was an ally to her then, but I was sadly also skeptical of her claims.

While peer influence certainly plays a role in reinforcing passive scripts of female identity, what I found so striking in my experience was the array of administrative actions and inactions that explicitly and implicitly communicated that my needs were not as important as my male partner and that I could not rely on institutions to offer me safety. On one occasion, after helping after school with a fundraiser, D tracked me down to “talk.” What quickly escalated into a verbal fight went on for an hour. My teacher went looking for me after I hadn’t reported back to her after the event. She found us—I remember feeling ashamed, sweaty, and upset. The next day, the vice-principal called me to her office to discipline me for “having intercourse” on school grounds, her assumption based on my disheveled appearance when the teacher found us. I had yet to

have sex at the time and tried to explain how my appearance was caused by a fight, not “intercourse.” After insisting over and over again that nothing had happened, she let me go, telling me that “I needed to have more respect for myself as a woman” and reprimanded me for the length of my skirt as I left her office. To my knowledge, no one ever talked to D about what they thought he had been doing.

In the last year of our relationship, the abuse began to escalate to physical acts of violence. We had broken up at the end of senior year and he went into my senior art exhibition, which included several cropped photographs of him, and stole the photographs. When my art instructor and I went to retrieve the photographs from him, he pulled them out of his locker and ripped them up in the middle of the hallway while screaming at me. At this point, the school did intervene but by calling his father, a prominent politician, while leaving my family out of the conversation. I was repaid \$50 for my works of art but no other disciplinary action was taken.

As an Ideological State Apparatus, my school perpetuated the ideology of patriarchy by indoctrinating students in stereotypical and heteronormative gender roles. Both of these instances clearly communicated that the administration was more interested in policing my sexuality and protecting my abuser rather than offering me protection. Their administrative actions were based in an ideology that privileged the well-being of men, and, as someone within that institution, I likewise internalized the belief that men and their needs were superior to my own. This lasted for many years and contributed to “the reproduction of the relations of production” through teaching me to privilege others’ needs above my own. This, in turn, resulted in the exploitation of my emotional and domestic labor in future relationships. Not only was this ideology used to impact how I viewed myself functioning in romantic relationships, it normalized the very sexual harassment I would also encounter in the labor market. The school policy reflected and reproduced the sexist conditions of the workplace all the while instilling in me a

functional, passive and compliant series of dispositions (Althusser 1971).

At the same time, I was immersed in the ideologies of “purity” from my church and simultaneously fed hyper-sexualized scripts of femininity from the media. My peers were also wrestling to make meaning from their own experiences and the ideologies that they were confronting. All of these things entangled with one another made it very difficult for me, and those closest to me, to recognize what was happening. While I don’t feel any inclination to excuse or forgive my abuser for his violent behavior, I can also see why his own indoctrination into the pervasive sexist ideologies that permeate our culture could make it difficult for him to confront his own behavior or find other means of addressing the deep pain and insecurity that I can only guess he carried.

Moving Towards My Beckoning Future

Moving beyond my abusive relationships required me to learn how to love myself. This took years of informal schooling from my queer, feminist, and creative community. I eventually found myself in messy paint studios and sweaty electronic dance parties. I found myself in the embraces of lovers and friends and sexual empowerment. I found myself in a community that taught me to grant myself fluidity and hold myself accountable. I found myself in meditation and in yoga. It was my informal education outside institutions and alternative ideologies that allowed me to heal. I have since moved beyond the messaging that I was to be compliant, that my sexuality was shameful, and that abuse was to be expected. Recognizing my strength and resilience and learning to love myself through this healing process, along with protective factors and the privilege I embody, played a major role in being able to grow out of these experience.

Implications for Social Work

We often ask survivors to rely on our criminal justice system in addressing issues of IPV, sexual harassment, and sexual assault. As a survivor whose abuser is currently sitting in office, this insistence to trust our criminal justice system and government has always struck me as asinine. This reliance on a state apparatus is not only ineffectual, as a majority of cases of sexual assault aren't ever "solved," but also perpetuates "carceral feminism," or a feminism that fails to take into account how relying on the criminal justice system poses significant danger for people of color, LGBTQ folks, and sex workers (Harris, 2018; Press, 2018). In place of the carceral feminist approach, Kelly Hayes and Miriam Kaba (2018), Chicago-based organizers and abolitionists, call for "transformative justice," which they define as "community process developed by antiviolence activists of color, in particular, who wanted to create responses to violence that do what criminal punishment systems fail to do: build support and more safety for the person harmed, figure out how the broader context was set up for this harm to happen, and how that context can be changed so that this harm is less likely to happen again (para. 5)." In other words, to undermine the ISAs, we must also look outside of the state apparatus for healing and, as social workers, citizens, and human beings, engage our imaginations in forging new relational solutions, centering the most vulnerable voices throughout our work.

We must, therefore, also trace the through lines of ISAs from our families to our churches, schools, cultural institutions, and professional settings. In schools, this means teaching young people about IPV, sexual harassment, sexual violence, consent, and healthy relationships. In Chicago, organizations like the Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health (ICAH) conducts peer-led workshops for youth and youth-led workshops for adults to support further learning about sexual and relationship health. The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network have free resources available to ensure that we are teaching LGBTQ-inclusive sexuality education. The Idaho Coalition Against Sexual and Domestic Violence published a curriculum review of evidence-based practice-informed prevention curriculums

(Curriculum Review of Evidence Based and Practice Informed Prevention Approaches to Adolescent Dating Abuse, Sexual Assault, and Stalking, N.D.) as well as a collaborative planning tool for schools to address teen IPV (Advocacy Resources, N.D.; Collaborative Planning Tool for Multi-faceted Prevention Initiatives, N.D.). In agency settings, this work could start with reviewing agency policies to ensure that they protect and support workers in instances of sexual harassment. Metoo.org offers local and national resources and toolkits through their websites that can be used across various settings.

The current public reckoning with sexual violence and harassment makes me hopeful that young people today will see that IPV is unacceptable. In addition to shifting these conversations in the media, we can and must shift our practices in schools to ensure all students' safety regardless of their gender, sexual identity, race/ethnicity, and class. This will require us to push back on the functional, ideological, and economic underpinnings that privilege the well-being of some at the cost of others. It will require us to attune our ears to the otherwise silent "noise" of our ideologies.

References

Advocacy Resources (n.d.) Retrieved March 3rd, 2019, from <https://metoomvmt.org/advocacy-resources-library/toolkits/>

Althusser, L. (1971). Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" in Lenin and Philosophy. *Trans. Ben Brewster. New York: Monthly Review Press*, 127-182.

Banyard, V. L., & Cross, C. (2008). Consequences of teen dating violence: Understanding intervening variables in ecological context. *Violence Against Women*, 14(9), 998-1013.

Bourdieu, P. (1980). Structures, habitus, practices. *In The Logic of practice* (pp. 52-65). Stanford, CA: Stanford UP.

Bowles, S., & Gintis, H. (1976). *Schooling in capitalist America* (Vol. 57). New York: Basic Books.

Campbell, Jacquelyn C. (2002). "Health consequences of intimate partner violence." *The Lancet* 359.9314: 1331-1336.

Curriculum Review of Evidence Based and Practice Informed Prevention Approaches to Adolescent Dating Abuse, Sexual Assault, and Stalking (n.d.) Retrieved March 3rd, 2019, from <https://idvsa.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Curriculum-Reviewof-Evidence-Based-and-Practiced-Informed-Prevention-Approaches-to-Adolescent-Dating-Abuse-Sexual-Assault-and-Stalking.pdf>

Collaborative Planning Tool for Multi-faceted Prevention Initiatives (n.d.) Retrieved March 3rd, 2019, from <https://idvsa.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Collaborative-Planning-Tool-for-Multi-Faceted-Prevention-Initiative.pdf>

Davies, L. (1983). Gender, resistance, and power. In *Gender, class, and education* (pp.39-52).

Hayes, K., Kaba, M., (2018, February 5th) The Sentencing of Larry Nassar was not transformative justice. Here's why. *The Appeal*. Retrieved from: <https://theappeal.org/the-sentencing-of-larry-nassar-was-not-transformative-justice-here-s-why-a2ea323a6645/>

Harris, E. (Producer). (2018, November 10th) *Case Cleared (part 1)* [Audio Podcast] Retrieved from <https://www.revealnews.org/episodes/case-cleared-part-1/>

Harris, E. (Producer). (2018, November 17th) *Case Cleared (part 2)* [Audio Podcast] Retrieved from <https://www.revealnews.org/episodes/case-cleared-part-2/>

Kearl, H. (2018). The Facts Behind the #metoo Movement: A National Study on Sexual Harassment and Assault. Retrieved from <http://www.stopstreetharassment.org/wpcontent/>

uploads/2018/01/Full-Report-2018-National-Study-on-Sexual-Harassmentand-Assault.pdf

O'Keeffe, N. K., Brockopp, K., & Chew, E. (1986). Teen dating violence. *Social Work, 31*(6), 465-468.

Press, A. (2018, February 1st) #MeToo must avoid "carceral feminism". *Vox*. Retrieved from: <https://www.vox.com/the-big-idea/2018/2/1/16952744/me-too-larry-nassar-judge-aquilina-feminism>

Salzberg, S. (2017). *Real Love: The Art of Mindful Connection*. Flatiron Books. What's the State of Sex Education In the U.S.? (n.d.) Retrieved March 3rd, 2019, from <https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/for-educators/whats-state-sex-education-us>