

SPECIAL FEATURE

‘The Freudian Coverup’: A Reappraisal

Edited by Celia KITZINGER

EDITOR’S INTRODUCTION

FLORENCE RUSH: SPEAKING OUT AGAINST INJUSTICE

Over the last 25 years, in her writing, her committee work and her political activism, Florence Rush has been committed to exposing and protesting injustice — including the sexual abuse of girls, the prejudice and homophobia suffered by people with AIDS, and the mother-blaming theories promoted by professionals. Her classic article, ‘The Freudian Coverup’, reprinted here with commentaries from Alex Benjamin, Siobhan Lloyd, Lynne Segal, Janet Sayers and Louise Armstrong (followed by a ‘Response’ to these commentaries from Florence Rush herself), represents only a small part of her work as a writer and activist.

Born in 1918 of Russian immigrants to the USA, and now in her late 70s, Florence Rush’s involvement in political activism began when she was in her 50s, back in 1971, with the optimism and anger of early Second Wave feminism. She was invited to speak on the topic of incest at a conference organized by the New York Radical Feminists, and this conference (at which Phyllis Chesler [1971/4] also spoke — on ‘Rape and Psychotherapy’) reflected the concerns and politics which led to the formation of rape crisis centres throughout the USA. At that conference (and in the subsequent book, Connell and Wilson, 1974) ‘the central revelation was that the violent rapist and the boyfriend/husband are one. The friend and lover commits rape every bit as much as the “fiend” prowling the street’ (Manhart and Rush, 1971/4: i).

Back then it was possible to say (as it is not now) that ‘there is very little material on the subject of sexual abuse generally and particularly as it relates to

Feminism & Psychology © 1996 SAGE (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi), Vol. 6(2): 251–259

children' (Rush, 1971/1974: 66). In addressing this topic, Florence Rush drew on her work with abused children as a psychiatric social worker, and on her own experiences of sexual molestation in childhood and beyond. At the New York Radical Feminists Conference, she described how, in her youth, she and her friends:

... became rather casual about our experiences, rarely outraged, but simply tried to develop greater skills in avoiding and extricating ourselves from the sexual aggression of men without embarrassing the offender. This was excellent training and prepared me in later years for the breast-grabbers, the bottom-pinchers, and the body-rubbers. The horror, the shame, and the humiliation never left me, but until recently I never knew I had the right to be outraged and fight back. I was, after all, trained to be a woman (Rush, 1971/1974: 65).

She drew also on the (limited amount of) existing literature on child sexual abuse demonstrating its 'contradiction and bias', its 'unforgivable and shameful' sexism, and its 'male arrogance'. Many 'experts' of the time sought to attribute the blame for child sexual abuse either to the child (who 'might have been the actual seducer rather than the one innocently seduced' [Burton, 1968, cited in Rush 1974: 69]) or to the mother. She quoted 'experts' whose writings serve to normalize child sexual abuse: Paul Gebhart (1965, cited in Rush, 1974: 68), for example, who comments that 'sexual activity between adult and immature animals is common and appears to be biologically normal', and Kinsey et al. (1953, cited in Rush, 1974: 70) who find it 'difficult to understand why a child, except for its cultural conditioning, should be disturbed by having its genitalia touched'. Her New York Radical Feminists Conference paper concluded that:

The sexual abuse of children ... is an unspoken but prominent factor in socializing and preparing the female to accept a subordinate role; to feel guilty, ashamed, and to tolerate, through fear, the power exercised over her by men. That the female's early sexual experiences prepare her to submit in later life to the adult forms of sexual abuse heaped on her by her boyfriend, her lover, and her husband. In short, the sexual abuse of female children is a process of education that prepares them to become the wives and mothers of America (Rush, 1971/74: 73-4).

After the conference, Florence Rush published several articles related to this theme (e.g. Rush, 1972a), and other feminist concerns such as 'can liberated women relate to men?' (Rush, 1972b). Her classic article, 'The Freudian Coverup', followed a few years later and was subsequently incorporated into her book, *The Best Kept Secret: Sexual Abuse of Children* (1980). Outraged by contemporary theorizing about child sexual abuse, she sought to explain (and attack) its source in Freudian theory:

I am often reminded by today's experts in the new psychologies that Freud's theories are now outdated. ... We are told that Freud is passé, the Oedipal com-

plex is a period piece, the idea of penis envy is quite gauche. But though the words may have changed, the melody lingers on and Freudian concepts are more popular today than ever ...¹

Her paper offers a blistering attack on Freud and Freudian approaches to child sexual abuse, in particular, Freud's refusal to believe his women patients' accounts of sexual abuse in childhood. Women who reported such abuse were actually, said Freud, fantasizing: 'this phantasy of being seduced by the father [is] the expression of the typical Oedipus complex in women'. Any 'reality' in their fantasies derived, said Freud, not from the father, but from the mother, 'for it was really the mother who by her activities over the child's bodily hygiene inevitably stimulated and perhaps even aroused for the first time, pleasurable sensations in her genitals'. Florence Rush's paper explores the personal and professional reasons which might explain why Freud abandoned his initial belief in women's accounts of abuse (the so-called 'seduction theory'), replacing it with the Oedipal theory, and illustrates the ways in which he withheld or altered information from his patients so as to support his new theory.

As the article makes clear, she is less concerned to blame Freud than to deal with the consequence of his theories today:

To hold Freud responsible ... is pointless. He lived in an age in which logic, reason, and science supposedly supplanted religious mysticism — an era which required scientific rather than religious authority to justify brutal social injustice and inequities. Freud fitted the bill. His theories, surrounded by scientific aura, allowed for the suppression and concealment of the sexual exploitation of the female child.

The contemporary consequences of this theory are illustrated in Florence Rush's account of her work with Annie, aged 12, who had been sexually abused for two years by her father before being admitted to the children's home where Florence Rush worked:

I thought I might help her to understand that her father was the guilty one, and he was the one to be ashamed. But my supervisor would have none of that, and he handed me the formula straight from the book. The actual event did not harm her, he continued. It was her deep, unconscious incestuous wish for her father that made her feel guilty. One must listen carefully, be sensitive to the nuances of the child's fantasies, and at the right moment help her to understand that her shame evolved from her own deep sexual desires.

It is the work of Florence Rush and other feminists in the 1970s and 1980s (e.g. Louise Armstrong, Susan Brownmiller, Diana Russell, Rebecca and Russell Dobash — all cited by contributors to this Special Feature) which have made arguments of this nature increasingly unacceptable and implausible in a professional context. As Lynne Segal² points out, 'Rush accused Freud ... several years before the mainstream media and the psychoanalytic profession would

itself begin to engage with many of her arguments'. Although more recent male appropriations of these arguments are sometimes given greater weight both in psychology and in the media (Janet Sayers, for example, learned about Freud's motives from Jeffrey Masson's [1984] account), it was the *feminist* challenge which compelled psychology to shift its ground. And there is no doubting the influence of Florence Rush's contribution. As Lynne Segal writes:

I remember its photocopied contents circulating at the packed feminist gatherings [of the late 1970s] Rush's essay was part of a profound and abiding cultural consciousness-raising around the criminal extent and obscene neglect of child sexual abuse.

There was still very little written at that time about child sexual abuse; Siobhan Lloyd, then a member of the Aberdeen Rape Crisis collective, read the book in 1980 and remembers the feelings of 'outrage, anger and of recognition'. It was, as Louise Armstrong says 'heady stuff, then, the finding of *corroboration*: the high-energy dialogue; the sense of urgent purpose behind the research and analysis, the clear *naming* that signalled serious purpose — as though there really, really were a possibility of change'. Her essay, then, 'served as a political catalyst for crucial feminist campaigning' (Lynne Segal).

The contributors to this Special Feature differ from and disagree with each other both in their readings and in their assessment of Florence Rush's original paper and also in their opinions as to the extent to which things have changed. Most of the contributors agree, however, that there is still a 'contemporary coverup' (Alex Benjamin). Although a key contribution of Florence Rush's paper was to 'legitimate the voices of survivors' (Siobhan Lloyd), this legitimization is attacked and undermined by the more recent diagnosis of 'false memory syndrome,'³ mentioned with concern by virtually all the commentators. Florence Rush (1990) has written elsewhere of the 'many faces of backlash' against feminism, arguing persuasively that ideas of 'reverse sexism' and 'gender neutrality', along with the psychologization of women's oppression, constitute a powerful reaction against which we can measure the strength of the feminist movement.

Since her early work on child sexual abuse, Florence Rush has participated in the Women's Liberation Movement in a range of ways, including serving on the Board of New York Women Against Rape, producing and exhibiting a slide show, 'Children in the Media', which focuses on the media eroticization of children, chairing the 'Media Reform Committee' of the National Organization of Women New York City chapter, serving on the Advisory committee on the Treatment of Sexual Aggressors at the New York State Psychiatric Institute, and working against the national and international child pornography industry. She has testified at legislative hearings on the sexual victimization of children, and is also a founder member of Older Women's Liberation (OWL), was a member of its steering committee, and organized a conference on older women's

issues. However, her most important recent work, she says, has been as an AIDS activist.

In July of 1987, her son Matthew and his lover Ron were diagnosed with AIDS and Florence Rush dropped almost all of her previous activities to learn about their illness, and to care for both her son and his lover until their deaths three years later. In an article in *Ms* magazine, she describes this experience — setting it in the broader context of the relationship between PWAs (persons with AIDS) and their ageing care-giving mothers:

Matthew died on July 15, 1990, at the age of 39 and I, his mother, turned 73 in January of 1991. This is becoming a common alliance — between an independent strong adult who has been reduced to a state of childlike dependency and a mother who, past her child-rearing and child-nurturing years, is thrust back into caring for the most basic needs of a ‘child’ who can no longer be self-sufficient.

The PWA, suffering from a variety of opportunistic infections, is filled with pain and terror, but is simultaneously struggling to maintain a modicum of control and the capacity to function. A deteriorating body begins to wear down the spirit and the aging mother reflects the patient’s helplessness. He finds her anxiety and pain unbearable. She has become close; too close almost, as when he was a needy infant. So he turns on her in anger and pushes her away. Later he will call her back. She ricochets between his need and his rejection.

This disease comes to the mother when she is most vulnerable to the traumas of aging. She may be suffering from high blood pressure, arthritis, the loss of a spouse, family and friends. She has financial worries and limited mobility. Or it may come at a time when she was looking forward to a peaceful life with children and grandchildren and family who might care for and protect her. Instead, she finds herself planning for her child’s death; talking about living wills, estate will, cremation vs. burial, and memorial services.

It was supposed to be the other way around (Rush, 1991b).

Florence Rush’s published work around AIDS is rigorous and challenging. It includes ‘An Open Letter to the Parents of My Son’s Lover’ (Rush, 1991a) in which she expresses her anger with Ron’s fundamentalist Christian parents, who never accepted Ron’s homosexuality or the fact that Matt and Ron were devoted companions and lovers for almost eight years. The opening few sentences give a sense of the passionate caring and commitment to justice out of which it was written:

Neither of you, Mom and Dad, were there for your son’s long, tormented illness. You turned your back on him. Dad, you once said to me that, after all, he chose this life style — meaning, of course, that AIDS was the deserved punishment for Ron’s homosexuality

Where were you when your son, in terror, learned that he had AIDS; when he was hospitalized with a rare form of pneumonia, when his body was racked with violent chills, with fever of over 104 and 105, with throbbing headaches; when he had to tolerate painful biopsies, a surgically inserted catheter, and intravenous medication to prevent blindness?

I was there.

I was there to hold him tight when spasms threatened to throw him out of bed,

to apply ice packs to his burning body, to get him to and from doctors and hospitals and to arrange for someone to care for him when I had to attend to my own sick son ...

Ron once said to me, 'Florence, you have been more of a mother to me than my own mother'. But, it was you, Mom, that he yearned for. You didn't hear, you didn't come, and, for all he knew, you didn't care. I don't regret one moment of my involvement, but it was you he wanted and your rejection of him was almost as painful as his illness (Rush, 1991a).

Before Matt's illness, Florence Rush had written vigorously about the dangers for women of the 'caring' and 'maternal' role, and her work on this topic is a powerful and poignant instance of all that is best in feminist renditions of 'the personal is political'. In a paper reflecting on her own experiences of pregnancy and early childrearing (Rush, 1973a), she attacked child-care 'experts' of the 1940s, movingly describing the feelings of guilt they engendered in her, and excoriating them for their relentless relegation of young mothers to lives of self-sacrifice, self-doubt and battered self-esteem. 'As a young wife and mother', she says, 'I took my domestic role very seriously. I went for psychiatric help and immersed myself in the work of child experts in an attempt to understand why my husband was always so angry and why my children, who never slept, refused to toilet train according to the age schedules set up by the experts ...'. Margaret Ribble, author of 'the severest yet most impressive work of that period, the bible on infant care for me and so many other women' is the target (along with Francis Ilg and Arnold Gesell) of her scathing feminist criticism, albeit years after their negative effect on her personally:

Eventually it dawned on me that, in my case, the rewards of wifehood and motherhood were cancelled by extremely stressful situations and that the professionals I looked to for help only compounded my anxieties by inflicting self-blame and eroding my sense of self-esteem ... I do not make important life changes quickly or easily. It was not until I reached age fifty when I finally realized that I had options.

That was when she discovered the Women's Liberation Movement:

I was a suburban housewife, and my daughter introduced me to the Women's Movement. My marriage was drifting onto the rocks, and I kind of grabbed on to this and put on dungarees and combat boots and became involved in organizing CR groups. I found support for my discontent, became a feminist and activist, terminated my long marriage ... My children, now grown, were on their way and, I thought, we were mutually ready to break from painful emotional ties and obligations and expectations inherent in maternal-child relationships. It was not that simple. I now suspect that my free-thinking children, despite their disdain of togetherness, would have preferred a more ordinary cooking, baking, child and family involved motherly type rather than the out-spoken, assertive, politically active person I had become.

In her article, 'Women in the Middle' (Rush, 1973b), she described how middle-

aged women are often trapped between the demands of adult children and ageing parents. Again, this reflects her personal experience:

After my children were finally grown and in the process of leaving home, my father had two massive heart attacks. I was drawn into a nightmare of nurses, doctors, and hospitals, while my mother, crying and helpless, also needed attention. ... At my father's funeral, my mother's widowed state was much discussed but not of great concern because she had a daughter to care for her. ... At the other end of the spectrum, I had to cope with my grown children and these problems were no less disturbing or complicated.

Her conclusion to that paper argues that:

It is hard, if not impossible, to estimate the cost to a human being in terms of time, energy, pain, and guilt as a result of the above relationships. The woman in the middle is the target of all negative emotions stemming from each family member's failure and frustration and the damage can never be measured. When things go wrong, and they always do, she bears the burden, the responsibility and the blame. If she is to save herself, the woman in the middle must learn to reject the myths regarding her family ties and responsibilities. She must no longer accept as natural her designated role as servant to all. She must question and challenge the privilege that excludes men from responsibilities and involvements with other human beings (Rush, 1973b: 5).

By the 1980s, Florence Rush felt she had established 'an autonomous new identity':

It was good. It was very good until ... until that day in July of 1987 when Matthew came to tell me he had AIDS. Suddenly all that I had strived for and achieved over thirty years evaporated inside of ten minutes. I became again the mother whose only purpose in life was to care for and protect her child.

But Florence Rush did not, of course, allow caring for her dying son and his lover to remain a purely 'personal' experience. Within a few months of learning their diagnosis, she had become an active participant in the Mothers' Support Group, and she went on subsequently to organize a Mothers' Support Bereavement Group and a Mothers' Initiative hotline — a telephone service for mothers of people with AIDS. Linking her own experience with that of other mothers of people with AIDS, she spoke out again on behalf of women's rights and needs in the caring role into which they had been thrust. Relating the burdens placed on her in this role with those delegated to mothers more generally, from the child-care experts on, she realized 'there was a mother book in me nagging to come out'. The book (still looking for a publisher) will be her next endeavour and will be in part 'a continuation of my previous grappling with "motherhood"' and in part based on the voices of all the mothers who have taken part in the Mothers of PWA groups of which she has been a part. Its aim is to 'offer a new look at mothers whose efforts are generally taken for granted and who go unsupported'.

In sum, Florence Rush has been, and continues to be, an important and moving voice in second wave feminist activism. As editor of this Special Feature, I am grateful for her clarity, anger, and passionate commitment to justice, and the journal Editorial Group is honoured to be able to publish this celebration of her work.

NOTES

1. Unattributed quotations from Florence Rush are taken from the Featured Reprint, the Afterword, or from a telephone interview conducted with her on 26 October 1995. Florence Rush has read and approved this Introduction to her work.
2. Unattributed quotations from contributors to this Special Feature are taken from their contributions to this volume.
3. See also Shuman and Galvez (1995) and the forthcoming Special Feature on False Memory Syndrome, edited by Erica Burman and Laura Brown, *Feminism & Psychology* 7(2)

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