

Silence and the Magdalene Laundry Survivors

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This paper will consider how the social and historical context of Irish life during the past 50 years has allowed for the establishment and maintenance of “conspiracies of silence” about Ireland’s Magdalene Laundries¹. Specifically, this paper will address the long-term psychological impact of this context on the survivors who were placed in the laundries after being removed from homes where they were experiencing child sexual abuse. Such conspiracies often emerge after a major traumatic experience, comprising an individual’s decision to remain silent; imposed silence; as well as a collusion of silence between survivors and society to not talk about the trauma (Saul, 2014).

Reducing a person’s *choice* to speak comprises meaning-making, which is, like trauma, a collective process, “particularly when the shared experience is a historic event” (Saul, 2014). For Zerubavel (2006), such ‘silent witnessing’ highlights a core tension between knowledge (personal awareness) and acknowledgement (public discourse) in mutual denial. Ritter (2014, p.176) notes that traumatic silences in therapy can reflect both the initial disconnect with trauma, as well as “a silencing identification with the original silencer”. Therefore, this paper will consider how silence around trauma is both an individual and collective experience. Survivors of trauma will often report feeling sworn to silence as the “bearers of a secret” (Mucci, 2013, p.79), which is transferred to the next generation in a collective act of remaining silent.

Further, the process of recovery from trauma is *collective*, necessitating social interaction and support and ‘ending’ the silence (Herman, 1992; Pennebaker & Gonzales, 2008). Much has been written about the silencing of trauma survivors when their experiences are “taboo” and therefore characterized by silence. Silence here must be understood from a personal, cognitive level (as a form of survival) and in terms of broader social processes. The Irish women who spent time in Magdalene Laundries therefore represent a group who have been victims of trauma in many cases, but also victims of Irish society’s capacity to “forget” collectively, and remain silent on our collective responsibility to remember their stories.

¹ Ten Magdalene Laundries operated in the Irish State between 1922 and 1996; they were run by the Religious Orders with the mission to rehabilitate “fallen” or immoral girls and women. Life in the Laundries was characterized by silence, prayer, and hard labour, for which the women were not paid.