

# Sexual violence in the context of domestic abuse.

Reframing the experience beyond PTSD and incapacitated avoidance models.

Dr Adeline Moussion Esteve

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# Introducing myself

- Feminist anthropologist
- Sexual violence and trauma
  - PhD at Birkbeck
  - SHaME project
  - Women's experiences of DV in France
- Postdoc at Birkbeck
- Recovery History
- Survivors and practitioners' experiences of 'recovery' and living with the aftermath of CSA in the UK

**SEXUAL  
HARMS  
+  
MEDICAL  
ENCOUNTERS**

**RECOVERY  
HISTORIES**

# Publications

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*Special Issue: Fear: Perspectives from the Social Sciences*

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### **Domestic fear beyond traumatic terror: understanding mothers' everyday experiences of recurring fear in the context of domestic violence**

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### **LE CORPS DE LA MÈRE TENSIONS ENTRE LA CATÉGORIE D'ACTION PUBLIQUE «VICTIME DE VIOLENCES CONJUGALES» ET L'ATTENTION MATERNELLE**

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#### **RÉSUMÉ**

*L'article examine un angle mort de la catégorie d'action publique française «victime de violences conjugales» depuis l'expérience de la mère qui tente de «partir». Analysant des données ethnographiques, il décrit les focalisations de l'attention d'une femme que j'ai suivie dans ses démarches. Des tensions ont surgi entre le corps attentif et actif de la mère et le corps anticipé publiquement de la «victime», révélant la normativité de la compréhension publique de la protection.*

**Mots-clés :** corps, attention, violences conjugales, victime, action publique.

## **Mettre de côté la violence**

**Esquisse d'une critique féministe des usages de « l'amnésie  
traumatique » pour politiser les violences sexuelles**

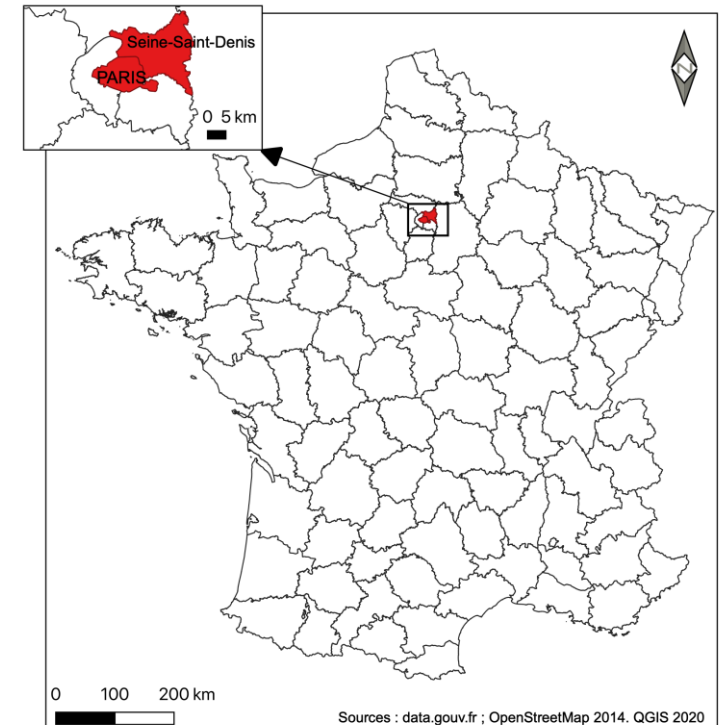
Par Adeline Moussion



Le fleuve Léthé, composition lithographique de Girodet-Trioson tirée de l'Enéide et des Géorgiques de Virgile, 1827, Bibliothèque nationale de France

# My Research

- Multi-sited fieldwork
  - Expert knowledge
  - Professional intervention at FW
  - Women's everyday lives
- 1 year of participant observation
- Interviews in the end
  - Semi-structured
  - Unstructured



# Research Participants

Experts/ practitioners

7 Women

- French
- In economically precarious situations
- 30s-50s
- Cisheterosexual mostly
- 5 Mothers (3 currently parenting)
- 5 Muslim, French citizen from Algerian descent

# Methods of Data Production



FW  
CONSULTATIONS



OUTSIDE FW



DAILY LIFE



NOT ASKING ABOUT  
VIOLENCE



FOLLOW  
SPONTANEOUS  
FOCI OF ATTENTION

# Two models of incapacitated avoidance

- Two models for incapacitated avoidance of violence
  - **Acute:** 'terror', freezing, dissociation/ 'sideration'
  - **Chronic:** PTSD, 'emprise', unsecure attachment = biological and relational elements

# Acute responses:

‘freezing’,  
‘terror’,  
‘dissociation’

Imagine, I'm walking in the forest. I have the basic equipment to deal with danger, there was a tornado yesterday: my eyes registered that it's abnormal that the trees are moving, the noise too. All of this ignited the brain's amygdala, my alert system kicks in, there is a production of stress hormones, cortisol - increased blood sugar - and adrenaline - my heart beats faster. I'm programmed to **fight or flight**: I fled. My hippocampus will register the event and remind me not to go into the forest during a storm.

Imagine, I am 6 years old. Daddy comes to my bed, undresses me. Adrenalin is toxic for the heart, it's possible to have a cardiac arrest from terror, and cortisol burns the cerebral neurons. As we are living organisms supposed to live a long time, we switch off when facing a danger. Morphine-like and ketamine-like hormones are produced, I can't feel anything (...) The 6-year-old girl with her dad has no reactivity, she is there...*like a deer in the headlights*: it **freezes**.

# Chronic incapacitation

- ‘Addiction to cortisol and adrenaline’
- Searches for ‘occasions to dissociate’
- Development of ‘traumatic personalities’
- Chronicisation of acute stress:
  - ‘Domestic violence has several traumatic impacts: a ‘stress overload’ which makes the subject feel threatened (...) from this point on, a state of acute stress or even post-traumatic stress develops, which is a form of chronicisation of acute stress: the reaction is perpetuated in the repeated shocks of domestic abuse.’

# Some problems with these discourses

Patterns of  
incapacitated  
avoidance

Evidenced by  
biological processes

Neither the context,  
nor the repetition and  
anticipation of abuse  
can affect victims'  
responses

**Womens' Experiences:**

**Organising without Opposing it**

# Non-verbal organisation (1):

## Avoiding the 'no'

- risk of physical brutality, economic deprivation, or harassment in the following days.
- *'Those who say just say no', in fact, they don't know what it's like to live with the person on your back, to the point where you can't go anywhere but in the house.'*

# Non-verbal organisation (2): handling the consequences

- Discouraging the sexual initiative without having to interact
- Anticipating the effects of sexual violence:
  - STDs, forced pregnancy
- Balancing of risks which are not limited to the **acts** of sexual violence

# Instrumental endurance (1)

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## Feigning sexual pleasure

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‘With my ex I didn’t feel like it at all... But when I said no, it ended up being a rape, nothing more, nothing less. So, you pretend, you moan, you pretend, you moan, you move, he’s happy and then that’s it. It goes quickly, and you want it to go quickly, so you do everything to make it go quickly.’

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Submissiveness as handling the modalities of the coercive control and of the sexual violence

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Bodily know how => use of knowledge on male sexual pleasure

# Instrumental endurance (2)

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**Feigning a spontaneous initiation** of a sexual act

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Avoid some elements of brutality within the coercive sexual interaction

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Forcing oneself without seeming like it = comply to the sexual script

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Chose the sexual position

# Instrumental endurance

Instrumental endurance vs acute / chronic conditioned responses

The situation is not reduced to the acts in themselves

- Future daily life and things to do
- Negotiation/bargain with coercive control by enduring acts of violence

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# Another picture of incapacitation

- **‘instrumental endurance’**
  - vs terror, dissociation, PTSD
- **Domestic knowledge and know-how**
  - vs symptoms/consequences
- **Agency vs paralysis**
- **Structural vs biological incapacitation**

# Questioning the uses of biological evidence

Need for biological evidence of innocence < cultures of disbelief and blame

Actively not resisting done intentionally = use of women's sexualised bodies

Need to tackle cultures of blame instead of merely turning to biological evidence

# Thank you

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