BREAKING the SILENCE

A pioneer in treating men who were sexually abused as boys, psychoanalyst **Richard Gartner '67** has spent nearly four decades bringing a formerly taboo subject into the public discourse.

By Lini S. Kadaba | Photography by Patrick Montero

About 15 years ago,

pioneering psychoanalyst **Richard Gartner '67** came to an understanding about his zeal for helping men who had been sexually abused as boys—a motivation that had persisted even when his own profession didn't take his work seriously, even when the painful memories of his patients weighed heavily on his soul.

"It dawned on me that my experience at Haverford was about ethics and social responsibility," says the 76-year-old training and supervising analyst at the William Alanson White Institute in New York City, "and it changed me. I became much more oriented toward service and empathic reaching out ...

toward becoming an advocate and activist for marginalized people."

Over nearly four decades, Gartner has treated arguably one of the most marginalized of groups: men sexually abused as boys. Through six books; numerous published articles, interviews, and conference presentations; and countless therapy sessions with patients, Gartner has broken ground on how to treat male sexual abuse and, through a tenacity few others share, has brought the often-taboo topic into public discourse. His 1999 publication *Betrayed as Boys* is considered the first book for therapists to address male sexual victimization.

In 2021, Gartner was recognized with the Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Psychological Association's Division of Trauma Psychology—a significant, and satisfying, acknowledgment of his contributions to the field.

In the nineties, though, when he first began speaking out, Gartner says, "My work, in general, was looked at askance. People wondered why I was on this strange journey about this population that many believed didn't exist. ... I was aware at case conferences that if I brought up the possibility that [male sexual victimization] could be an issue for the patient someone was presenting, there was a lot of, not exactly eye-rolling, but basically eye-rolling. 'Here he goes again.' "

Recognizing the Sexual Victimization of Boys: A Short History

1895: Sigmund Freud proposes his Seduction Theory, which attributes the origins of hysteria in his patients to repressed memories of childhood sexual abuse. A few years later, he abandons the idea, concluding that memories of sexual abuse were fantasies.

1932: At the 12th International Psycho-Analytic Congress in Germany, Sándor Ferenczi presents a paper in which he states that he believes his patients' accounts of sexual abuse as children. That puts him at odds with his mentor, Freud, and leads to his falling out with the psychoanalytic profession.

1930s-1950s: Psychoanalytic, psychiatric, and psychological literature largely accepts Freud's idea that patients' memories of childhood sexual abuse and assault represent fantasies and wish fulfillments.

1971: The first rape crisis center, Bay Area Women Against Rape, opens in Oakland, Calif. Many more such centers open across the country in the 1970s and 1980s, but it does not become common for male victims to be treated at them until the 1990s and later.

1988: The first self-help book for male survivors of sexual abuse, *Victims No Longer* by Mike Lew is published.

1991: Richard Gartner starts one of the early therapy groups for sexually abused men in New York City.

1994: Gartner helps establish MaleSurvivor, a discussion forum for men who were sexually victimized as boys. It has grown to 16,000 registered users from around the world.

1995: Gartner founds and becomes the director of the Sexual Abuse Service at the William Alanson White Institute, one of the earliest of its kind.

2002: The *Boston Globe*'s expose of the cover-up by the Archdiocese of Boston of child molestation claims against at least 70 priests puts a national spotlight on the widespread sexual abuse of boys within the American Roman Catholic Church and makes the issue part of the public discourse.

2005: *Beyond Betrayal: Taking Charge of Your Life after Boyhood Sexual Abuse*, Gartner's third book—written for the general public—helps many sexually abused men begin to heal.

2012: In a highly publicized case, Jerry Sandusky, a former assistant football coach at Penn State University, is convicted of molesting 10 boys over a 15-year period and sentenced to 30 to 60 years in prison. Allegations about his behavior had first surfaced in 1998, but even after the university received additional eyewitness reports about Sandusky, in 2000 and 2001, officials took no action.

2002-2012: During this period, numerous celebrities begin to speak out about their own abuse. Among them: cyclist Greg LeMond, boxer Sugar Ray Leonard, media mogul Tyler Perry, actor Tom Arnold, CNN anchor Don Lemon, *New York Times* journalist Charles Blow, former Massachusetts U.S. Senator Scott Brown, and many others. These stories help other men come forward and seek help.

2015: The first rape crisis center devoted solely to male victims opens in Stockholm, Sweden.

2019: New York State joins many other states in passing the Child Victims Act, allowing victims sexually abused as children to sue abusers and the institutions in which abuse took place even though the previous statute of limitations had run out. Gartner was one of many experts who testified urging passage of this bill.

2022: New York State passes the Adult Survivors Act, giving adult survivors of sexual abuse and assault the same right previously given only to children to sue abusers and institutions even after the previous statute of limitations had run out.

Why the skepticism, even outright resistance toward the possibility of male sexual abuse?

"People don't want to hear about boys being sexually molested," he says. "Period."

In the foyer of Gartner's homey office in New York's Greenwich Village, one wall displays a large poster of Hungarian psychoanalyst Sándor Ferenczi. Gartner, a slight, soft-spoken man with white hair and glasses, explains that in the early 1930s, Ferenczi, who was a disciple of Freud, wrote a paper arguing his belief in his female patients' accounts of sexual abuse as girls. Four decades earlier, in the mid-1890s, Freud had similarly proposed his Seduction Theory, which attributed the origins of his female patients' hysteria to childhood sexual abuse.

"The reaction in Vienna and elsewhere was horrified," Gartner says. Freud eventually abandoned his hypothesis and went on to attribute patients' sexual abuse memories to fantasy and wish fulfillment. Ferenczi's ideas, then, put him at odds with his mentor. "Freud banished him," Gartner says. Ferenczi's work would not find acceptance until decades later.

"He believed his patients and learned how to talk to them in a way that encouraged them to face their trauma," Gartner says. That's what Gartner has tried to do as well, addressing head-on during the late eighties and the nineties doubts about recovered memories.

"He recognizes the full range of abuse men have experienced," says retired psychiatrist Murray Schane, president of the nonprofit MaleSurvivor organization and discussion forum that Gartner helped establish in 1994 and that now has 16,000 registered users. "But, I really think his profound impact has been on training, directly and indirectly, therapists around the world who then go on to treat men who have been abused."

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), about 1 in 13 boys in the United States experience sexual abuse. Gartner, citing other research, puts the prevalence higher, noting up to 1 in 6 boys have had unwanted, direct sexual contact with an older person by the age of 16. (By comparison, the figure for girls is about 1 in 4.)

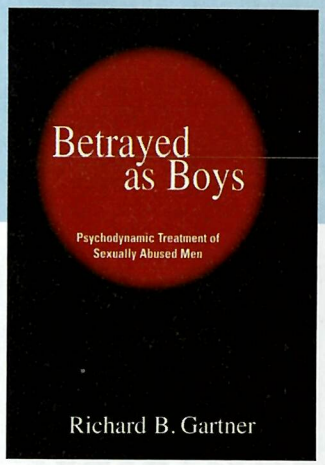
It is, of course, not easy work. In fact, Gartner's 2017 book *Trauma and Counter-trauma, Resilience and Counterresilience*, explores the toll on analysts. The idea stemmed from his struggles with hearing thousands of stories of sexual abuse. "You become a vessel for a lot of pain," he says. But Gartner also has gained strength from his patients, many of whom, despite trauma and areas of dysfunction, lead productive lives. The father of two, who's married to a psychologist, says he learned to make sure to have room for a rich personal life.

But Gartner never stopped treating the men. With no plans to retire, he still sees patients one on one; leads a therapy group he started in 1991 (albeit virtually since the pandemic); teaches at the Manhattan Institute for Psychoanalysis in addition to his work at the White Institute; and continues to give professional seminars, speak, and write on the subject.

"Children have a right to their childhood," says Gartner, his voice rising ever so slightly. "Once they've been betrayed in this way, a piece of their childhood ends.... 'Betrayal' is in the title of five of my six books. It's not a coincidence. I'm an interpersonal, relational psychoanalyst, and I think the real trauma of sexual abuse is not about the sexual acts. It's about the betrayal of a relationship. That's truly the bedrock of my work."

BOOKS
by Richard Gartner

- ***Memories of Sexual Betrayal: Truth, Fantasy, Repression, and Dissociation*** (Jason Aronson, 1997)
- ***Betrayed as Boys: Psychodynamic Treatment of Sexually Abused Men*** (Guilford Press, 1999)
- ***Beyond Betrayal: Taking Charge of Your Life after Boyhood Sexual Abuse*** (Wiley, 2005)
- ***Trauma and Countertrauma, Resilience and Counterresilience: Insights from Psychoanalysts and Trauma Experts*** (Routledge, 2017)
- ***Understanding the Sexual Betrayal of Boys and Men*** (Routledge, 2018)
- ***Healing Sexually Betrayed Men and Boys*** (Routledge, 2018)



Gartner has long been interested in the emotional connections among people. Raised in the Bronx, he entered Haverford with plans to study English. "I always liked literature that focused on interpersonal relationships," he says, citing as favorites anything by Jane Austen and the plays of Shakespeare, Eugene O'Neill, and Tennessee Williams. The psychological dynamics in these works fascinated him, and after taking a psychology course he found his major—and vocation.

While writing an autobiographical chapter for a book on Jewish men, he realized the immense impact of his Haverford days, he says. "Honor. Service. Ethics," he wrote. "I embraced Haverford and used it to help me make more coherent the moral framework I needed to articulate."

Gartner says it wasn't a specific class or extracurricular (he was a theater guy) that awakened his sense of social responsibility, but rather the way his professors, some of them Quakers, and the campus community, talked of the times, of the Vietnam War, segregation, and the 1964 Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater. "I breathed in the air," he says.

Soon after earning his doctorate in clinical psychology at Columbia University in 1972, he focused on family therapy, often with highly disturbed families. But by his early thirties, he says he was burnt out and pursued psychoanalytic training at the White Institute. In his private practice, he saw individuals with anxiety, depression, and relationship problems.

In the late eighties, he began treating a male patient for depression who described images (roses, for one) that evoked panic. Over months, Gartner realized the man was talking about sexual abuse. (The roses were part of the pattern of the wallpaper in the living room where his father abused him.)

"I looked in the professional literature at that time," he says. "There was almost nothing about male sexual victimization. I did the best I could on my own." That included group therapy, when he realized his patient and other abused men needed to know—to personally experience—they were not alone. As a result of professional networking, more referrals came his way. The 2005 publication of his book, *Beyond Betrayal*, for the general public made him the media's go-to expert. When Jerry Sandusky went to trial in 2012 for abusing teenage boys at Penn State University, Gartner says his practice exploded with referrals.

Throughout, he says, his goal for patients has been "to repair the betrayal part of them, which is not just symptom removal but really looking at that hurt, that pain, and not make believe it didn't happen, but rather to incorporate it into life in such a way that actually enhances life. That's not possible for everybody, but it is possible for many."

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