

From the Anti-violence Movement to a Positive Feminism

Hard Knocks: Domestic Violence and the Psychology of Storytelling

By J. Haaken

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Reviewed by Paul T. P. Wong

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The title *Hard Knocks: Domestic Violence and the Psychology of Storytelling* really grabs my attention. Surviving hard knocks has been a way of life and an area of expertise for me. Besides being a justice fighter, my own research and practice have involved domestic violence and story telling. Thus, I wear three hats in reviewing this book: advocate, clinical psychologist, and positive psychology researcher.

Much of the book is devoted to resolving tensions within the anti-violence movement. The four areas of tension where “signs of battle fatigue have been most acute” (p. i) are: (a) Conflict between feminist advocacy and the state, (b) Conflict between domestic violence issues and larger anti-violence political agenda, (c) The debate on gender, race, class, and other dimensions of power, and (d) The debate over various forms of female aggression.

The book is based on a large research project over a period of eight years. The author’s research primarily consists of interviewing feminist advocates in different geographical regions, as well as reviewing novels, films, and domestic violence literature. She wants to show how cultural context shapes stories about domestic violence. She also attempts to rethink the role of psychology of storytelling.

Gender differences in aggression

Domestic violence is an umbrella term used to encompass a wide range of female grievances as well as abuse of children. What is noteworthy is that this widely accepted definition excludes the possibility that domestic violence perpetrated by women against men. In a national study on physical violence in American families, Straus and Gelles (1990) conclude that women are as likely as men to initiate aggression including the use

of physical force in domestic relationships. Most of these acts of aggression are not in the form of self-defense. Frieze (2000) points out the high levels of female violence in marriage and dating as supported by meta-analysis.

Haaken is suspicious of such findings on methodological grounds. She suggests that “those in power are never short of scientists ready to do their bidding, to produce findings that naturalize prevailing ideologies” (p. 55). My concern is that if ideology always trumps science, what is the point of doing any psychological research?

Feminist researchers have also been wrestling the problem of aggression in lesbian relationships. Considerable space of the book is devoted to reconciling this phenomenon with feminist ideology. Interestingly, some feminist scholars blame patriarchal society: “Violence in lesbian relationships is often rationalized as mimicking heterosexual domination” (p. 69).

Other feminist researchers attribute domestic violence within a lesbian relationship to (a) power dominance of the stronger partner, and (b) the frustration due to disappointment in the fantasy of romantic fulfillment. Logically, such analysis should be applicable to violence in heterosexual relationships.

The amount of energy devoted to exonerating women for initiating violence suggest that uncritical embrace of feminist assumptions and principles can hinder researchers from recognizing the obvious – both men and women have their bright and dark sides.

Gender and other causes of domestic violence

Within the feminist movement, racial issues and poverty have been cited as by ethnic minority groups as equally, if not more, important than gender issues. Haaken seems to have moved towards global/international feminism by recognizing the legitimacy of ethnicity and class as sources of power differentials and domestic violence, but she is less interested in the multiple truths that come from non-feminist psychological research and theories.

Nicolson (2010) is more critical of the radical feminism's position that men are wholly to blame for domestic abuse which is caused by gender-power relationships in a patriarchal society. She argues that "to neglect the emotions, experiences and psychological explanations for domestic violence is to fail those who suffer and thwart attempts to prevent future abuse" (Publisher's description). I would go even further that we need to pay more attention to the more current empirical research on abuse in intimate relationships as well as the large issue of violence and aggression in society.

Haaken realizes that "One of the real difficulties in feminist theorizing concerning abusive men is that any concession of the suffering and humanity of violent men seems to lead to lost ground for women. It does feel like a zero-sum game, where the larger the emotional space allowed men the more diminished the space for female grievances" (p. 168).

Feminist advocacy vs. the State

Here is the irony: The most visible success of the feminist movement is its ability to enlist government interventions on behalf of women. Feminist advocates have gained considerable power and control with support from the State. However, the feminist movement shares varying degrees of ambivalence towards yielding control to

government agencies of a patriarchal society. Advocates want government funding without compromising their own political power.

This tension within the feminist movement is resolved by forging feminist identity “around some of the simpler elements of early radical feminist positions, particularly the notion that women are uniformly the victims in situations of family violence” (p.44). One wonders whether clinging to radical feminist positions may hinder concerted efforts from government agencies, research, and clinical communities to resolve the problem of domestic violence.

Psychology of Storytelling in domestic violence

According to the product description, *Hard Knocks* “presents a radical re-reading of the contribution of psychology to feminist intervention and activism”. But the book employs feminist psychoanalytical concepts to expand feminist theory. The new cultural-historical angle simply re-interprets woman-battering as a form of identification with the aggression and violence committed by the colonizers.

Haaken acknowledges that “any project of social change requires some understanding of psychology” (p. 6), but throughout the book, the role of psychology in the domestic violence field is questioned and criticized based on ideological and political considerations rather than the reality of women’s lives or empirical studies.

She does tone down the anti-psychology rhetoric of radical feminism, but she falls short of recognizing the important contributions of psychology. On the one hand, Haaken recognizes that science and feminism share the same common cause in searching for understanding and solution of human suffering. On the other hand, she shares feminist

critics' mistrust of traditional sources of authority and points out that "scientists are active protagonists in the stories they tell, shaping the very findings that they produce" (p. 53), thus negating the value of scientific research.

If we approach psychology purely through the feminist lens then we can never discover any new findings beyond what is dictated by feminist theory. As a psychologist, I would like to see a more inclusive broader approach to domestic violence. A proper understanding of the psychology of domestic violence needs to go beyond feminist theory to incorporate other theoretical positions and all the available research findings.

"What is a typical story of how domestic violence happens?" (p. 84). Haaken identifies three genres: Stories of bondage, deliverance, and stories of struggle and reparation. These stories are based on interviews of advocates, individual victims of abuse as well as review of selective films and fictions. I don't see how her treatment of the stories contributes to the non-feminist psychology of storytelling.

Postmodern feminism prefers local stories to meta-stories because the former empowers people, whereas the latter imposes values and realities on individuals. As a research psychologist, local stories use richer and more complex pictures of domestic violence. For example, Takano's (2006) phenomenological research of Japanese women provides a much more complex picture of domestic violence than indicated by the three categories.

Although Haaken anticipates more variegated stories, still she adopts the top-down approach of looking at domestic violence from the grand theory of psychoanalysis and feminism. The three genres are based on feminist views of domestic violence, thus

hindering the discovery of fully understanding the experiences of violence and contributing factors in different historical and cultural contexts.

One recurrent theme is the denegation of traditional marriage and the nuclear family while ignoring the abundant literature that shows that children do best when raised by in an intact nuclear family (Parke, 2003) and married couples enjoy greater happiness and less stress than the unmarried (Coombs, 1991). Haaken and other feminist researchers need to answer this question: If marriage and nuclear family are the main source of oppression and violence against women and children, what would be the ideal family structure? What would be a better alternative to marriage in terms of promoting women's well-being and reducing violence?

Haaken points out the absence of a developed feminist psychology and minimizes the importance of personal healing, overcoming trauma, and self-affirmation. Instead, she chooses to focus on "the aggressive currents in women's lives and the broad range of experiences women have with violence" (p. 75). I find earlier feminist emphasis on moving on and personal triumph is more inspiring and helpful than an obsession with negativity in the collective and personal histories of women.

Haaken needs to examine various therapeutic approaches to domestic violence beyond feminist psychoanalytical cultural theory. Attachment theory, cognitive behavioral theory, and family systems theories are all helpful. My own meaning-centered approach has also been applied to helping abuse victims (Wong & McDonald, 2002).

Conclusions

The book is a rich and authoritative resource about both the history and current status of the feminist anti-violence movement. It will be a good text book in women

studies programs. But Haaken fails to recognize the progress in the psychology of story telling and the vital role of psychology in combating abuse. On the one hand, she is critical of radical feminists. On the other hand, she seems to agree with their anti-psychology sentiments. As a result, her nuanced approach makes one wonder where she stands with regard to psychology.

“My aim here has been to capture some of the passion of the anti-violence movement and to deepen our collective past” (p. 172), Haaken reiterates. Although she anticipates more varied stories from new generations of feminists, she does not offer a more hope vision for women and humanity. Is there need for a positive feminism?

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Paul T. P. Wong, PhD, C. Psych, is Professor Emeritus of Trent University. He present in independent practice. He is the Founding President of International Network on Personal Meaning (www.meaning.ca), International Society for Existential Psychology and Psychotherapy (www.existentialpsychology.org), and the Meaning-Centered Counselling Institute Inc. He has been developing a meaning-centered counselling and narrative therapy in the last ten years. His latest research interest focuses on the positive psychology of meaning in death acceptance and flourishing