

Book Review: *Femicide, Gender and Violence* (D.Bandelli, 2017)

BOOK REVIEW

Book Review: *Femicide, Gender and Violence*

By D.Bandelli (2017). Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN 978-3-319-47785-5.

Intimate partner violence (IPV) was routinely ignored before the 1970s unless it escalated to homicide, during a time that has now been labelled the “age of denial” (Dutton, 2006; p16). However, when Erin Pizzey opened the first women’s shelter in 1971, it started a movement of research that aimed to understand violence against women, and was a key moment in the development of the gendered model of IPV. This model attributes the causes of IPV to be related to gender inequality, patriarchy and male privilege, and describes it as a gender-based violence. As a model, this became the dominant narrative within research and practice at the time; there exists now a wealth of research within an alternative body of work that suggests it is not fit for purpose, and ignores evidence of women’s violence, bidirectional abuse and other risk factors for IPV. Yet despite this evidence, it remains the most influential model with IPV practice informing policy, and interventions for both perpetrators and victims. By remaining as the dominant approach to addressing IPV, it is unsuccessful in providing for the treatment needs of those involved with the criminal justice system. It fails to tackle the systemic nature of IPV by ignoring its multifarious causes (including social, developmental and intergenerational origins), and does not recognise the heterogeneity of perpetrator and victim groups (see Bates, Graham-Kevan, Bolam & Thornton, 2017 for further discussion). Not only does it not provide viable interventions for violent women, and male victims, but it also attempts to hold abusive men accountable through a confrontational process of shaming, which further fails to provide motivation for behaviour change.

The challenge of trying to critique or contest this model is a key theme in “*Femicide, Gender and Violence*”. In her book, Bandelli presents an in-depth analysis of the gendered discourse that exists in Italy around the development of the term “femminicidio” (translates

BOOK REVIEW

as “femicide”). Her discussion involves an exploration of the gendered or feminist model that exists of IPV, and how this model has emerged and is sustained within Italian culture and politics. This book provides an overview of the development of feminism within Italy, as well as the more recent political and cultural issues that have impacted on this. Here “femminicidio” is framed as the homicide of women because they are women; women’s victimisation made gender-based by being attributed to their lower status within a patriarchal society.

Bandelli begins her book by positioning herself as a researcher; whilst she is critical of some of the feminist discourse she clearly articulates that she is not anti-feminist, or anti-women. As she goes on to discuss in later chapters, dissenting voices that oppose this gender based framework are often portrayed as positioned within the men’s rights movement or politically positioned towards the right. She positions herself carefully as exploring the narrative around gender to further understand the power it has in Italian society. She then goes on to discuss, both philosophically and practically, the development of the gendered narrative through the normalisation of knowledge; once a narrative has achieved status as common sense, it makes exploring alternative constructions “heretic” (p12). She places her examination of these explanations of IPV within the context of Italian feminism and the historical and cultural conditions that have led to its position today.

In chapter four, Bandelli discusses her analysis of how the “femminicidio” narrative has influenced the public perceptions of IPV and domestic violence more widely. She frames her discussion around three specific events in time that she feels represent key moments that shaped this narrative between 2011 and 2013; specifically, she focuses on how the media portrayed this, and took up this issue as a social cause. Here the media plays a key role in how a social movement can cause and create “narratives of fear” (p.68). She critiques the way the media appropriate an issue such as violence against women, creating a potentially

BOOK REVIEW

inaccurate rhetoric that then receives political attention; she refers specifically to the increase over time in media coverage around femicide, whilst the actual reported rates of it remained quite stable. This chapter gave a fascinating appreciation into the not only the power of the media, but also how influential they are in selecting the issues that are then appropriated by politicians. It gave me an insight into some of the reasons there is such a barrier to evidence based practice in such a political area as IPV practice.

Bandelli explores the counter narratives that are currently challenging the gender based approach and also draws on the literature from the UK, US and Canada on the prevalence of abusive women and male victims of IPV, including the work of Murray Straus (e.g. Straus & Gelles, 1986) and others (e.g. Dutton & Nicholls, 2005; Cook, 2009). She recognises the wide variety of groups that speak to challenge the gendered approach including men's rights groups, shared parenting groups, more conservative anti-gender groups, as well as "general DV activists" (p.134). If I did have a criticism of her discussion, it would be that I felt this latter category was underplayed slightly; it is a group made up of researchers, activists and scientists that challenged the dominant narrative because that is what the evidence suggests, rather than being specifically influenced by a cause or ideology. That being said, she provides an excellent overview of the academic literature for both the gendered, and non-gendered approach, as well as the media and practice based work, that I feel would leave the reader with a clearer understanding of some of the most significant issues in this debate.

Bandelli's approach in this book is refreshing in its in-depth exploration of the philosophical, political and pragmatic issues that surround the narratives on IPV. Her critique of this dominant gendered narrative is thorough and evidence based. As a UK based researcher focusing on male victims of IPV, I found this examination of the discourse and politics particularly interesting. Where many scholars in the field, myself included,

BOOK REVIEW

acknowledge the issues and constantly work “against”, or challenge, the dominant narrative, it is rare that the philosophical and political underpinnings of these issues are discussed and critiqued in this way. The book is interesting, well-structured and accessible, even for those without a background in some of the more sophisticated philosophical texts. Whilst set in Italy, the theoretical and practice based issues being described can be echoed in many areas where politics can impinge practice (e.g. UK, Australia, US, Canada and more).

References:

- Bates, E.A., Graham-Kevan, N., Bolam, L. T. & Thornton, A. J. V. (2017). Review of Domestic Violence Perpetrator Programs in the UK. *Partner Abuse*, 8(1), 3-46. doi: 10.1891/1946-6560.8.1.37
- Cook, P. W. (2009). *Abused men: The hidden side of domestic violence*. ABC-CLIO.
- Dutton (2006a). The History of Spouse Assault. In Dutton, D. G. (Ed.) *Rethinking domestic violence* (pp. 3-17) Vancouver: UBS Press.
- Dutton, D. G., & Nicholls, T. L. (2005). The gender paradigm in domestic violence research and theory: Part 1—The conflict of theory and data. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 10(6), 680-714. doi: 10.1016/j.avb.2005.02.001
- Straus, M. A., & Gelles, R. J. (1986). Societal change and change in family violence from 1975 to 1985 as revealed by two national surveys. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 48(3)465-479.