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Courting Disaster: Intimate Stalking, Culture, and Criminal Justice

Aldine de Gruyter, 2002, pp. 204

\$US 23.95 paper (0-202-30662-3), \$US 49.95 hardcover (0-202-30661-5)

In *Courting Disaster*, Jennifer Dunn sets out to explore the interactional aspects of intimate stalking. Basing her analysis on case reports and interviews with victims, victim advocates, courtroom testimony, and a survey of undergraduate sorority women, Dunn tells a compelling story about the intricacies in intimate stalking situations and their aftermath. Within the first of a total of five chapters, stalking legislation and the process of seeking justice through the criminal justice system are presented. Then, the lived experiences of victims and some of their advocates (Ch. 2) and their attempt to develop “socially desirable” victim identities (Ch. 3) are explored. In the fourth chapter, the topic shifts to a cultural analysis of how courtship and intimacy are socially constructed, and how both women and men get trapped in the gendered web of romantic love. The fifth and the final chapter attempts to bind the different strands together, ending the book with a few suggestions about how the courts can rethink their position on “what would a reasonable person do” assumptions. Given the hurricane of emotions in stalking situations, the (often) long history of intimacy between the perpetrators and their victims, complex and contradictory cultural norms and expectations about gendered roles/behaviour, and how “fear” may be subjectively experienced, Dunn rightfully argues that women’s behaviour may not fit the “reasonable person” expectations.

Courting Disaster is certainly a timely contribution to explore the important (and elusive) area of intimate stalking that Canadians prefer to call “criminal harassment.” Although Dunn’s analysis is exclusively on legislation and the workings of the criminal justice process in the US., the normative expectations about what a reasonable person would/would not do in a similar situation is equally pertinent to criminal harassment cases in Canada.

As I see it, the most important strength of the current book is the frequent use of detailed quotes from interviewees and court records. Certainly, the undiluted words of the people who have survived or are currently being victimized by intimate stalking are the most powerful testament of the complexities. For women, the pulls and pushes toward the stalker while developing a workable identity for themselves is trying. Moving from a victim to a survivor but not overdoing the level of assertiveness in order to avoid revictimization by the criminal justice system is a perilous endeavour (Ch. 3 & 5). In the book, ambiguities and incongruities in the survivors’ lives are honestly and almost photographically captured. Chapter 3 is the most powerful part of the book where women are generously allowed to speak for themselves.

I also found Dunn’s survey of 267 sorority women helpful in empirically supporting her assertion about the mixed and heavily gendered messages about romantic realms of intimacy (first part of Ch. 4). The results from the sorority research crystalize the existing contradictions in what romantic love is/should be, and the positive bias for men’s assertive/aggressive role and women’s expected and valued passivity in being targets of male pursuit. Especially in cases of a long-term intimacy (Dunn’s study uses two levels of this variable), the interpretation of even quite intrusive and threatening behaviour of men is not uniform and straightforward. Dunn, rightfully returns to this important point

again in her concluding chapter (Ch. 5). She purports that if interpretation of men's intrusions is not uniform or straightforward for sorority women while they are calmly responding to a survey, how can the criminal justice system expect emotionally torn victims to act in decisive, clear-cut, consistent and rational ways in dealing with their often manipulative and threatening stalkers? Dunn then spends a considerable time (much too long a time, I might add) in dissecting the culturally mixed messages about men and women's courting behaviour and the tolerance for deviant men (beasts in the beauty and beast analogy), by analyzing the couples in eight box-office winner movies (Ch. 4).

My main unease about *Courting Disaster* is with its conceptual narrowness. Amongst numerous competing, but I would argue, equally powerful theoretical positions one can take on understanding stalking as a social problem, Dunn has chosen to stay exclusively within the boundary of symbolic interactionism. Goffman's numerous works, Blumer's and Holstein and Miller's assertions repeatedly appear in Dunn's attempt to address the phenomenon of stalking as a dramaturgical unfolding (although Dunn omits the term "dramaturgical" from her heavily Goffmanian analysis). Particularly men and women, but also the advocates and the deliverers of criminal justice are portrayed as caught in an eternal dance of attributing meanings and apportioning responsibility and blame. Undoubtedly, there is much to be gained from looking at stalking phenomenon through symbols, shared meanings, mixed messages and seeing the outcomes of the interplay between interpersonal conceptualizations and attributions. As Dunn's interview material clearly points out, people are not neatly divided into "victims" and "perpetrators." Instead, they are players, actors, interpreters, initiators, recipients, victims and survivors, simultaneously. People are "agents" who make choices and sometimes, the choices they make have negative consequences for them (such as women's innocent or unavoidable contact with the perpetrators inadvertently leading to the continuation of their being stalked, and even to accusations that they may have caused their predicament).

Despite the richness and depth of taking an exclusively interactionist view on stalking, there are unavoidable pitfalls of unquestioned loyalty to a micro-level analysis. Some of the pitfalls for the current interactionist analysis can be summed up in questions that the author never asks: For example, why is it that the vast majority of not only the stalkers but also the lawyers, judges, police and legislators are men? Why is it that intimate relationships are the most dangerous relationship in women's lives? What is the link between a general male dominance in the society and women's undesirable living conditions and transgressions against them? Why is there a continuum of violence against women even in societies that have made equality and equity important issues? What are the structural and historical determinants of seeing women as second class citizens? Why are women raised to be so dependent/responsible for relationships (even very bad ones)? Who benefits from the status quo of male dominance?

Although the answers to all of the above questions are crucial in understanding women as targets of men's aggression and violence, these questions are not approachable through a micro, interactionist lens. For example, a point which particularly puzzled me was Dunn's mostly covert, but in a few pages, overt attempts to separate "stalking" from other forms of violence against women. The author seems particularly adamant about protecting stalking victims from what she perceives to be the negative and *ad nauseam* (not her term) problematization of women's victimization in intimate violence situations (pp. 181-187). Although she uses some findings from the "rape" literature and occasionally refers to the continuation of violence after violent relationships dissolve, her insistence

seems to be that stalking must remain as a unique phenomenon rather than falling under the domestic violence efforts she finds unfashionable. In my contention, the dismissal of the notion of a continuum of violence against women has at least two negative consequences: The first is that this book has not benefited from a more in-depth review of the literature. Especially absent is the literature that directly links the spill-over of intimate violence to women's attempts to terminate intimate relationships. Likewise, the literature on intimate femicides is a noteworthy body of work which has been totally omitted, although most men who eventually kill their partners are likely to stalk them first. Thus, a substantial amount of literature that links prior violence and different kinds of violence to stalking remains missing from the bibliography Dunn taps into. A more negative outcome of the dismissal of the continuum of violence perspective becomes visible in one of Dunn's conclusions (p. 186). She recommends that laws similar to "rape shield laws" be developed to prevent defense attorneys from questioning the intimate histories of the stalking victims, especially their past behaviour toward their stalker. Of course, the danger is that such a protectionism may end up protecting the stalkers much more than their victims. For example, a former partner who may have beaten up a woman numerous times, who may have broken her ribs, caused miscarriages, engaged in marital rape, etc., may be "cleansed" from his violent past and reduced to the relatively much more ambiguous role of a "stalker" in the eyes of the legal process, if the continuum of violence dimension is not vigilantly maintained. Violated women may have a lot more to gain from a system which does not truncate their suffering to isolated events or typologies.

In short, *Courting Disaster* is certainly a well-written, mostly insightful interactionist account of a perturbing phenomenon. The informant accounts are rich and informative. The author also effectively uses worthy insights from the interactionist paradigm, justifiably highlighting the interplay amongst meanings, symbols and actors, and warning against a unidirectional view of events. However, by exclusively focusing on micro-level processes, this book leaves untouched many other structural determinants that can also shed light into stalking like other crimes against women and the responses of the criminal justice system to such crimes. The outcome is a good and informative read for undergraduate students and contains insights for front-line people who deal with day-by-day issues of stalking. However, confined by an exclusive micro focus, the book can only claim partial authority in the more sophisticated debates about stalking as a form of gendered violence.

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October 2002

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