

Aysan Sev'er.

Fleeing the House of Horrors: Women Who Have Left Abusive Partners.

University of Toronto Press, 2002, 240 pp.

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This excellent little book is less about “fleeing the house of horrors” than it is about the nature of the horrors themselves, and the prognoses for the 39 women whom the author interviewed and for other women who, like them, have found the strength to leave their abusive partners. The primary title is a strange choice, given that Sev'er completely forgoes any description of the means by which these women managed to escape safely to a new life. For those who are interested primarily in the process of leaving, and who appreciate excellent qualitative work, I would recommend Catherine Kirkwood's *Leaving Abusive Partners: From the Scars of Survival to the Wisdom for Change* (Kirkwood, 1993).

Sev'er's book is, however, an example of the power of qualitative research to provide the sort of “personal” insight into individual lives that contributes to the development of middle range social theory. I put personal in quotes because I do not mean personal in the sense of relevant only to the unique individual situation, or personal in the sense of non-objective. What I mean is personal in the sense of the best sociology, getting down to the interpersonal events and actions of everyday life that create the social patterns that we uncover in our large-scale survey research. This sort of qualitative research taps directly into the causal processes about which we so often only guess in response to our fancy statistical analyses.

I see this book as serving two useful purposes, as both a very readable introduction to the nature of “intimate terrorism” and as an important contribution to theories of its impact on survivors. I use the term “intimate terrorism” rather than “domestic violence” to distinguish the systematic, controlling abuse that Sev'er describes from other kinds of violence that take place in intimate relationships. In terms of male violence, I have argued elsewhere that it is essential that we make a distinction between the intimate terrorism that is described by most feminist theories of intimate partner violence and the situational couple violence that is described by the family violence theorists (Johnson, 2001). This book is clearly about the former—the systematic, controlling abuse described by Pence and Paymar's “power and control wheel” (Pence & Paymar, 1993), which Sev'er uses effectively both to describe the situation in which her respondents find themselves and to develop her own theory regarding its likely long-term impact on them.

As an introduction to intimate terrorism, the book would work well in courses at any post-secondary level. The book begins with a sophisticated but readable introduction to theories of intimate terrorism that concludes that feminist theoretical perspectives are likely to provide the most useful framework, combined with a little too much emphasis on social learning theory for my taste. (I lost count of how many times the author told us that the intergenerational transmission of intimate violence was

survival during the abuse, their largely inadequate social support systems, and their own violence. The final chapter is her own theory of prospects for post-violence adjustment, which is where she makes her most important theoretical contributions.

Sev'er does two very important things in that last chapter. First, she makes some important distinctions among women that she sees as affecting their reactions to the abuse and their prospects for recovery from its impact. She argues persuasively that in order to understand the nature of women's post-abuse adjustment we need to take into account the different life experiences with which they came to the abusive relationships that they describe. In particular, women who have experienced troubled lives prior to the abusive relationship react quite differently to the abuse than do women who had developed in a context that afforded them a strong sense of a valuable self. She then applies these insights to a model of adjustment that lays out the requisites for a return to the self-acceptance, self-confidence, and self-respect that were stolen from these women by their abusers. These requisites include safety, economic independence, new social networks, finding a way to deal with the past, and reassignment of blame, among others. For those who are familiar with Pence and Paymar's work, the connection with the spokes of their power and control wheel is obvious (and acknowledged). The focus of this model on the self might lead one at first to the concern that Sev'er has become too individualistic in her understanding of adjustment, but in fact her discussion of the requisites for self-healing makes it clear that the pre- and post-abuse social contexts are central factors in the prognoses for individual women.

If you want a readable and insightful introduction to the social and personal roots of intimate terrorism, this book will work for you. If you are looking for some cutting edge progress in understanding the long-term impact of such abuse on survivors, Aysan Sev'er has that for you as well.

References

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Michael P. Johnson
Penn State University
mpj@psu.edu

My current research focuses on differences in the causes and consequences of the major types of intimate partner violence (intimate terrorism, violent resistance, situational couple violence). For example, the

