

## Book Reviews

### *To Have and To Hit: Cultural Perspectives on Wife Beating*

Edited by D.A. Counts, J.K. Brown, and J.C. Campbell

Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1999, 344 pp.

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Reviewed by Helene Berman

Violence against women is a global problem. Although there are vastly different understandings of what constitutes acceptable treatment of women, understandings that are shaped by a complex interplay of social, historical, political, economic, and cultural realities, few if any parts of the world may be said to be violence free. Efforts to examine this disturbing reality — to consider the problem of wife beating and wife battering within the broad context in which it occurs — are complicated by the fact that violence is a multi-faceted and multi-layered phenomenon eluding simple explanations and dichotomous notions of cause and effect.

Despite the challenge, a new book, *To Have and To Hit*, edited by D.A. Counts, J.K. Brown, and J.C. Campbell, represents a laudable and noteworthy attempt at providing such clarification. As the authors consider the relevance of various theoretical frameworks such as cross-cultural research, evolutionary biology, feminist theory, social learning theory, subculture of violence theory, and general systems theory, they simultaneously explore strengths and limitations inherent in each. In an effort to examine difficult issues, the book forces us to confront widely accepted feminist understandings. Though not rejecting these outright, the authors encourage us to reflect critically upon our stock of taken-for-granted tenets of feminist thought.

*To Have and To Hit* is in part a compilation of ethnographic accounts from 15 distinct societies primarily in Melanesia. Also represented, though to a smaller extent, are groups in Central America, South America, Taiwan, the Middle East, and Africa. However, this book goes well beyond mere ethnographic description. While these accounts make for fascinating reading, the book's real strength lies in its attempt to critically examine the many manifestations of wife beating and battering; the pathways by which these behaviours are learned, transmitted, and enacted; and the strategies that women use to protect themselves

and/or escape from the violence in their lives. We also learn how those affected by violence, namely the victims, the perpetrators, and their families, feel about the violence that occurs within their communities. Most significantly, the authors provide insight into acceptable and unacceptable standards of behaviour, and then contemplate the behaviours and the responses to them within broad political and cultural contexts.

In addition to the accounts of human behaviour, three analytic chapters offer conceptual and theoretical insights. The introductory chapter (Brown) provides important definitions, premises, and assumptions that form the foundation for subsequent chapters. Among the insights is a distinction between wife beating and wife battering. This notion is raised briefly at various points throughout the book, then covered in greater depth towards the end in Campbell's compelling chapter on "sanctions and sanctuary." Upon first reading, this distinction is difficult to fully grasp, or, more aptly, accept. It is one that is not widely embraced in North America. In essence, wife beating is conceptualized as a range of aggressive acts against an intimate partner that fall within the scope of culturally acceptable behaviour. Viewed on a continuum of violent behaviours, wife beating lies at one end, construed as a form of physical aggression that is culturally sanctioned, inflicted occasionally, and typically resulting in few lasting or serious harmful effects. Wife battering lies at the other end of the continuum, construed as ongoing assault, carried out in the context of coercion, and not sanctioned or endorsed by others in the culture. The former is considered to be culturally universal.

While the authors explicitly state that they do not find any form of wife beating acceptable, they maintain that for the purpose of advancing theoretical understandings it is more fruitful to concentrate on wife battering. Herein lies an interesting dilemma. Throughout the book we are told of many instances of wife beating. In Lateef's chapter about an Indo-Fijian community, we learn about the widespread practice of wife beating stemming from a deeply entrenched ideology that insists on female submission to male dominance. Ironically, this ideology is sustained by the senior women in the household. The cultural imperative is for young wives to endure the beatings until they are old enough to gain respect as mothers of sons and can impose the same treatment on other young women.

We learn that among the Abelam, a horticultural people in Papua New Guinea, it is not unusual for men to physically beat their wives. This practice is tolerated if the violence is sufficiently moderate and

infrequent. The reasoning is that the socialization of women requires that they be subjected to such "punishments." Child beating, in contrast, is frowned upon by the Abelan, and the forms of physical discipline that might be deemed acceptable in Western society are prohibited.

Like any important work, *To Have and To Hit* raises more questions than it can fully answer. One of these concerns the issue of cultural relativism. In the name of cultural relativism, do we accept all forms of violence towards women? Or do we view cultures and their customs as constantly in flux and subject to change? Is it possible, then, to create a world where violence against women does not exist? Rather than attempt to provide simple solutions to such complex problems, or pass judgement on the relative rights or wrongs of each society, *To Have and To Hit* offers a framework for contemplating these difficult and thorny questions. The issues presented in this volume are of vital importance to nursing, and the book is a must for anyone concerned with an understanding of violence from a cross-cultural perspective.

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*Changing Violent Men*

R.E. Dobash, R.P. Dobash, K. Cavanagh, and R. Lewis  
Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000, 210 pp.  
ISBN 0-7619-0534-0; ISBN 0-7619-0353-9

Reviewed by Angela Henderson

This book makes an important contribution to our understanding of the task facing those who attempt to change the behaviour of men who use violence in intimate relationships. The authors first examine approaches taken by the criminal justice system to accomplish this task and then place their exploration within the context of society's response to the use of violence.

*Changing Violent Men* is an account of an evaluation designed to show the relative effectiveness of two court-imposed sanctions against men convicted of domestic violence. Two treatment programs — one court-mandated and one based in the voluntary community — are contrasted with other forms of sanction such as imposition of fines, probation, and imprisonment. The study focuses on the question *What, if anything, works, and why?* and then speaks to the larger question of whether men *can* change. The research design combines qualitative and quantitative approaches. The authors integrate the qualitative data effectively throughout the book by giving voice to the research participants, thus contextualizing the findings. One of the strengths of *Changing Violent Men* lies in its tone: at no time is one left with the impression that the authors condone the behaviour of violent men, yet they demonstrate enormous sensitivity and respect towards the men; Dobash et al. are clearly aware of the discomfort that participation in the program might have caused these men.

The first three chapters provide an overview of the issues involved in undertaking the research; some insights into the extent, characteristics, and impact of violence as described by the participants; and a summary of the usual criminal justice approaches to disciplining violent men and the specific content of the two programs. Chapter 4 describes the research design as well as solutions to some of the problems encountered in planning and conducting the study — for example, the intricacies of recruitment, timing, and data collection. Not least was the issue of how to help men who traditionally deny and minimize their violence to confront the reality and enormity of it. One of the creative solutions to this last problem involved the use of cue cards, a technique of holding up cards on which specific forms of violence are identified with a number; a man who cannot verbally acknowledge that he

kicked his partner, for example, can apparently say “yes” when the research assistant states the number associated with that item on a card.

Before describing the findings of the study, the authors, in chapter 5, outline the extent of the violence the men perpetrated before being sent to court. In the remainder of the book Dobash et al. describe the findings in terms of what works, whether violent men can change, whether any of the interventions had a positive effect on the participants’ quality of life, and, last but not least, the nature of the challenge that remains to us. The book is clear and logical, and it provides excellent direction for those who work with violent men as well as those who might be considering similar research.

The findings confirm that all approaches do meet with some success in the short term. The study also found that the two treatment programs resulted in an apparent change of attitude on the part of the men, enabling them to put themselves in the other person’s place and to take responsibility for changing their violent behaviour. An additional finding is that the men demonstrated a concurrent decrease in the use of other controlling tactics such as threats. This contradicts the widely held belief that non-physical means of control escalate when physical ones decrease. These findings poignantly illustrate that when interventions are effective, not only in curtailing men’s violence but also in changing their views on the nature of their relationships, everyone benefits: men and women once again begin to enjoy each other’s company and that of their children; children cease to be exposed to parental conflict; and the culture as a whole benefits from decreased financial drain and strong, healthy families as a foundation for the next generation.

This excellent book concludes with a call for action. The authors point out that a sustained change in male behaviour requires a comprehensive and coherent approach by the culture as a whole. Support services must be available to women seeking to escape violent partnerships; police and courts must take the problem seriously; and, while programs for abusers are important, we must all be committed to rejecting the status quo. As *Changing Violent Men* makes explicit, much remains to be done in the drive to end violence against women in their homes.

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