



Book Reviews

The Presence of the Past : Male Violence in the Family

by Jan Horsfall

Allen & Unwin : Sydney, 1991. 167 pp. \$18.95.

Jan Horsfall's book on men's violence is one of a number of books published on the topic in the last couple of years. The book is impressive in its coverage of the issue and ambitious in its overall purpose: to bridge the gap between the macro-social analyses and the psychological explanations for men's violence.

The first three chapters of the book analyse the contributions of patriarchy, the modern family and male gender construction to men's violence.

In Chapter One, Horsfall argues that the present public-domestic split contributes to male violence by separating males off into male support networks and diminishing the potential for female congregations. Men in public power, she says, have the ability to determine what levels of violence against women are acceptable in society. Most women in the private sphere are financially dependent on men and thus if they experience violence have limited options.

In Chapter Two, she notes that the family is a safe place for men to vent their anger and frustrations. Further, as men are more likely than women to approve of sharp gender differentiation, they can use their power to enforce the differences they feel are important to them.

Horsfall draws upon object relations theory in Chapter Three to analyse the relations between intra-psychic processes and gender relations. Following Chodorow, she notes that women are universally largely responsible for early child care. As fathers distance themselves emotionally and physically from active parenting, boys experience great difficulty identifying with the father in early years. As a consequence, the boy is forced to look beyond his primary caregivers for information about masculinity. By reverting to the media and peer culture, boys are likely to

incorporate male stereotypical characteristics into their personalities including toughness, aggressiveness and violence.

Horsfall concludes that all in all gender identification for males is difficult to achieve within the family. As a result men who are unsure of their masculinity may engage in violence in a desperate attempt to prove to themselves that they are male.

In her endeavour to profile the batterer, Horsfall argues that in addition to an insecure masculinity violent men have low self esteem and a high emotional dependency upon women.

Horsfall's final chapter is concerned with what can be done to prevent male violence against women. She leaves few stones unturned in her comprehensive response, from macro-social structural aspects of the problem to male personality characteristics.

She acknowledges the need for social equality for women, affordable child care, active parenting by fathers, a guaranteed minimum income to all parents, cheap public housing, eliminating gratuitous media violence, promoting the values of caring, educating the professionals, criminalising violence against women, promoting men's consciousness raising groups and counselling violent men and non-sexist educational programs in schools.

However, in spite of Horsfall's recognition of the wider structural forces and her attempts to bridge the gap between structural and psychological explanations, there is a tendency in the book to pathologise men's violence. Violent men are distinguished from normal men by reference to low self esteem and high emotional dependency.

It is the premise of many men's counselling programmes that violent behaviour is due to low self esteem, feelings of inadequacy and fear of intimacy. Such programmes aim to nurture men

back into non-violence by providing opportunities for them to express their feelings, to learn to take care of themselves and regain self esteem.

Such programmes ignore a number of realities. Many men who are afraid of intimacy and experience feelings of low self esteem do not batter their partners. On the other hand, many men who do beat their partners demonstrate that they do not experience feelings of inadequacy.

To what extent are violent men different from other men? Recent research suggests that there are no essential psychological differences between men who batter their partners and those that do not do so.

At many points Horsfall acknowledges that male violence arose to some extent from normal male characteristics encouraged by our society. However, this recognition does not lead her to theorise the psychology of men's violence within a wider structural context. This work has yet to be done.

Although one can be critical of the book for its overreliance on psychological explanations, it is valuable as an introductory text to many of the debates surrounding male violence. The awareness of structural forces avoids a complete psychological reductionism and the preventative measures advocated should be widely discussed.

The book will be beyond the reach of many violent men themselves, though it will speak to the views of many counsellors working with violent men.

My main concern in fact is that the book will be used to reinforce a counselling response to men's violence in contrast to the paucity of institutional and cultural change work.

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