

Book review

Real rape, real pain: Help for women sexually assaulted by male partners

REVIEWED BY CAMERON BOYD

Real rape, real pain: Help for women sexually assaulted by male partners. Patricia Easteal and Louise McOrmond-Plummer, Melbourne: Hybrid Publishers. 2006.

The recent Personal Safety Survey highlights the ongoing problem of sexual assault of women in relationships. An estimated 27,400 women in Australia have experienced sexual assault by their current partner, and 272,300 by a previous partner. However, these figures, which are likely to be underestimates, say little about the experience of sexual assault by a partner or the barriers women face in disclosing and escaping this violence. In *Real rape, real pain: Help for women sexually assaulted by male partners*, based on interviews with thirty women as well as the personal experiences of the authors, Patricia Easteal and Louise McOrmond-Plummer explore the barriers to reporting partner rape: partner rape is often not recognised or named as assault; the fear of the repercussions of disclosing abuse from the perpetrator; and a fear that others will minimise or disbelieve the disclosure of abuse.

The book is written, as the authors put it, “for, not about” women. The personal stories interspersed throughout the book show how partner rape is a specific type of traumatic and abusive situation. It may occur in a context of domestic violence, but understandings of domestic violence *per se* do not adequately capture the nature of partner sexual assault. Similarly, sexual assault can occur in the context of a “once-off” incident with an acquaintance, date or stranger; this too is different from sexual abuse by a partner. While the book is primarily intended for women who have experienced or are experiencing rape by a partner, the problem of partner rape is framed as a social problem, not just as a problem of individual women. The book is organised around three main themes: Healing, Identifying sexual assaults, and Confronting society’s denial.

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Healing is an overarching concern of the book. Survivors spoke of the vital importance of “surround[ing] yourself as much as possible with supportive people” (p. 187). While some women have “friends who gently encourage me in my healing” (Summer, p. 5), for others finding support is not straightforward: “Who do you tell? You certainly don’t tell your parents. You can’t tell your innocent and straight co-workers. I didn’t have any friends I trusted” (Tiffany, p. 9). The book encourages a range of supports such as groups, counselling, medication and online communities and includes a chapter on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which is seen as a helpful way to make sense of partner sexual assault. However, the potential for PTSD to pathologise the victim/survivor is something the book seeks to avoid. The authors state that “being raped and being traumatised are not negative personality traits” (p. 182).

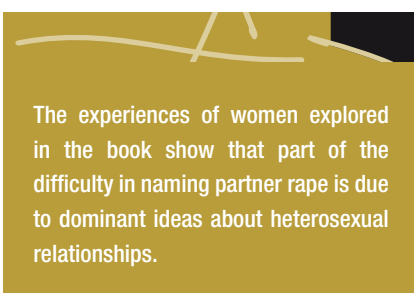
There is a clear message here that coping strategies are just that, and not a sign of weakness or pathology. Strategies that may have been helpful or necessary in the context of surviving a sexually abusive relationship, however, may become limiting when women are no longer in the abusive relationship and trying to form new relationships, or to move on. The book emphasises that making choices is an important step in women’s healing process. As one survivor recalls:

When I self-injured, I believed that I was doing it because I was raped and needed to punish myself for being dirty ... I began to understand that I could make a choice not to cut. It was not my fault that I was raped. It was not my fault I was depressed. However, while these factors could make me feel like cutting, they could not actually force me to do it. (Rachel, p. 237)

A second theme is the importance of naming partner rape. Naming rape is an act of defiance, of breaking the silence around partner rape. The book never suggests that it is easy to speak out as a survivor of partner sexual abuse and the authors explicitly identify the difficulties they each faced in reaching this point. “Each survivor who takes the risk and reveals that part of them to others is making a statement that we are not ashamed and that we won’t keep the secret any longer” (p. xvii). This is a step that both authors take in revealing that they have been in relationships involving sexual abuse by a partner.

The experiences of women explored in the book show that part of the difficulty in naming partner rape is due to dominant ideas about heterosexual relationships. The dynamics of abuse do not always appear to be so different from “normal” gendered expectations in relationships, particularly regarding issues of consent and men’s sense of sexual entitlement:

I knew from the very beginning that Maggot’s [partner’s name] acts were sexual assault but I also knew it would be next to impossible to prove that this was taking place as I was in a husband/wife relationship with him. (Jennifer, p. 29)



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Crucially, the chapter discussing men who rape their partners manages to explore the perceptions of abusive men without “psychologising” or explaining away their actions as the result of some kind of personal pathology. This chapter unsettles the assumption that abusive men are “sick”, or that women must somehow be complicit in the abuse. Sexual assault in relationships is about power, control and an inflated sense of entitlement, and this point is well made. Particularly compelling is the comparison between statements made by men who have raped their partner and men who have raped “strangers” (p. 66). The comparison reveals no difference, reinforcing the point that rape in relationships is “real rape”.

On a personal level, “To name can be a deeply healing exercise in taking back power and control. Until you define it as rape, you may not believe that you have a wound for which you deserve empathy, support and healing” (p. 208). The word “rape” can be extremely difficult to utter, even if a woman knows that is what happened. The connotations (personally and socially) of being a victim of rape, of describing oneself in those words, prohibit many women from naming their experience as rape. This is not framed as a personal weakness but as a reflection of societal attitudes towards women victims of partner rape.

The book argues that the difficulty that victim/survivors spoke of in naming partner rape as “real rape” is compounded by society’s denial. A profoundly harmful aspect of partner rape is the difficulty that women can face when they do recognise the abusiveness of their situation, yet find the responses of others to whom she may have turned for assistance unhelpful or unsupportive. Women seeking validation of their experience are often faced with interpretations of partner rape that suggest the rape is a sign of something wrong in “the relationship”, rather than “something the perpetrator does to control and hurt you” (p. 153).

What is especially important about this book is the recognition of the complex issues facing women who are sexually assaulted by male partners. Women who name their experiences as rape but who may find that, despite their growing awareness of the abusiveness of their situation, they are unable, or do not wish, to leave the relationship. While never condoning the violence, and encouraging women to consider leaving (to quote from one of the interviewees: “If I could advise other survivors, I’d say, “Recognise it and get out”), the authors also convey a sense of compassion for women who, for whatever reasons, stay in the relationship. Advice at either extreme—that minimises or excuses the rape, or demands that the woman must leave the relationship immediately—is equally unhelpful.

The difficulties around such decisions are discussed in detail, particularly the psychological dynamics of abuse, the material financial dependency of many women, and having children (for both pragmatic reasons or from fear that the abusive partner may use the legal system to restrict or prevent the woman’s

future contact with her children). Whatever the context, the authors emphasise that staying in an abusive relationship does not diminish a woman's right to or need for safety and respect. For women intending to leave a sexually violent or abusive relationship, planning is crucial in light of the fact that separation can be a period of high risk of violence.

Real rape, real pain validates the traumatic and abusive nature of partner abuse, and challenges many of the myths that deny or minimise the harm caused by this form of sexual assault. The inclusion of women's stories (including some detailed accounts of abuse) and the jargon-free style make it widely accessible. At just over 300 pages long, it is not necessarily intended as a book to be read cover-to-cover. As well as being directly accessible to women who have experienced sexual assault by a partner, this could also be a useful resource for counsellors as a way of addressing the profound sense of isolation that women in sexually abusive relationships often feel. The quotes from the women, interspersed throughout the book, could be particularly useful for this purpose. By emphasising healing and positive steps that women can take, the book offers hope without denying the horrific and disturbing reality faced by many women.

Further reading

Russell, D. (1990). *Rape in marriage*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Other ACSSA resources

See Heenan, M. (2004). *Just "keeping the peace": A reluctance to respond to male partner sexual violence* (ACSSA Issues Paper No. 1). Melbourne: Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault.

See also Good practice profile: Understanding and responding to disclosures of intimate partner sexual violence, *ACSSA Aware*, 5, 25.

New additions to the ACSSA Good Practice Database

More information about all Good Practice programs is available online at:
www.aifs.gov.au/acssa/gpdb/programs.html

Dulwich Centre

Preventing Prisoner Rape Project

The *Prisoner Rape Support Package* has been developed by the *Preventing Prisoner Rape Project* to try to provide assistance to men who have been raped or sexually assaulted in prison. Still a "work in progress", the project aims to raise awareness about the issue of rape in prisons and reach out and support prison rape survivors, as well as working towards changes at legal and prison administration levels.

Imaginif

BITSS of Protective Play—A skill based workshop for family and child workers

The BITSS program is based on the traditional Protective Behaviours program, with a specific focus on child sexual assault prevention. The program is being run with a number of organisations around Cairns, and with a number of Indigenous communities around Cape York Peninsula. The program is run with small groups of parents as well as professionals. The direct participation of parents, in their own communities, is the strength of this program. (Imaginif is a privately owned fee-for-service organisation.)