

BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

Huey, Laura and Broll, Ryan. *Becoming Strong: Impoverished Women and the Struggles to Overcome Violence*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018, pp. 160, \$24.95, paper, (9781442626850).

In a society that tends to pathologize individuals rather than focusing on their strengths, Laura Huey and Ryan Broll's *Becoming Strong* is a welcome testament to how complex the lives of women experiencing homelessness actually are, and how these complexities translate across various events in their lives such as witnessing and personally experiencing violent victimization, coping skills, and the process of 'becoming strong'. By drawing on scholarship regarding homelessness, victimization, trauma, and resiliency from disciplines such as sociology, criminology, psychology, and social work, Huey and Broll analyzed 187 in-depth qualitative accounts of self-selected women who were accessing shelter services between 2011-2014 in Chicago, Detroit, and Los Angeles. Huey and Broll stated several of their work's intentions, such as to provide insight into the struggles of women experiencing homelessness and violence in hopes of creating more nuanced portrayals of these women. Moreover, in order to move away from an exclusively pathological analysis and instead focus on positive factors that enable women to recover from experiences of violence and reduce cycles of homelessness, they paired women's stories with both trauma and resiliency scholarship.

Through analyzing open-ended interviews, Huey and Broll found that most participants were engaged in the process of 'becoming strong' by developing a sense of closure and resiliency but had yet to 'successfully overcome' their experiences of violent victimization. The authors employed the term 'becoming strong' in order to highlight resiliency as a process that consists of several phases. The first phase, moving on, is adopting an attitude that one is no longer defined by a survivor identity. In the second phase, active healing, participants take steps to manifest moving on from experiences of victimization, including taking responsibility for their recovery. The third phase is marked by setting goals and having dreams whereby individuals adopt feelings that enable future-oriented thinking. Finally, the fourth phase, closure, is characterized by feeling as though previous experiences of victimization are in the distant past.

Perhaps one of the most salient and important contributions that Huey and Broll make in *Becoming Strong* is their engagement with and analysis of Ungar's (2004) concept of 'hidden resiliency'. Huey and Broll advance this concept to explain how women who are experiencing homelessness and are in the process of 'becoming strong' often employ coping strategies that are typically considered maladaptive when applied in the general population. For example, many professionals consider 'avoidance-based coping', whereby individuals try to compartmentalize or focus on solving short-term problems rather than dealing with one's larger issues, as harmful because this form of coping does not deal with one's broader struggles. However, Huey and Broll argue that, given the particular contexts of participants' lives, usage of such strategies should actually be considered rational and adaptive because "what might appear to be struggling, or basic survival, in one situation can, in an unconventional setting such as the streets, be examples of personal strength and demonstrative of one's resolve to overcome adversity" (28) thereby constituting an appropriate response. In this way, Huey and Broll problematize the common binaries that are often used to consider coping strategies. For example, they critique understanding strategies as either approaching or avoiding problems, and as either adaptive or maladaptive to the process of recovery.

Combining their analyses of resiliency as a 'process' and 'hidden resiliency', Huey and Broll argue that, when it comes to women experiencing homelessness, it is important to take "a more nuanced approach that recognizes and responds to where individuals are 'at' in the resilience process" rather than "treating all use of avoidant coping as signs of some type of pathology" (95). In other words, they argue that it is imperative to contextualize coping strategies with individuals' life circumstances as well as with how individuals perceive the effects of those strategies on their recovery process. For instance, if women experiencing homelessness ignore their lengthy histories of violence, and instead concentrate on manageable problems such as finding food or a place to sleep, this strategy should be considered an example of hidden resiliency rather than as avoidant and maladaptive.

Moreover, Huey and Broll argue that if women currently experiencing homelessness are capable of making strides in their recovery process, even more could be accomplished if they were housed and had access to supports that were sensitive to their strengths as well as their place in the recovery process. Ultimately, Huey and Broll advance three recommendations that are derived from their findings. First, they argue for the increased awareness that resiliency is a process that must take individual life circumstances into account. Second, they argue that social

work settings should use strengths-based approaches to their programs. Lastly, they argue that women experiencing homelessness and who are engaged in the process of ‘becoming strong’ should be supported via the provision of affordable housing and accessible social services.

Admirably, Huey and Broll’s *Becoming Strong* takes a relatively equivalent approach in attending to both the existing scholarship on their topic as well as to their findings in terms of discussing trauma *and* resiliency, rather than simply adopting a trauma- or deficit-centered approach. By employing this strategy, Huey and Broll fill several notable gaps in the current literature, namely the lack of understanding about how women who are homeless ‘move past’ their experiences of violence, the strategies they employ to do so, and resiliency among this group of women. Additionally, their emphasis on participants’ voices is commendable because when one reads *Becoming Strong*, participants’ stories are front and center in such a way that one can readily ‘hear’ and begin to ‘see’ participants’ lived experiences. The ability for readers to better understand this group of women has implications for the creation of innovative strategies and programs that are based on more nuanced portrayals of women experiencing homelessness who are also in the process of becoming resilient after experiences of violent victimization. In other words, increased understanding can lead to the development of programs that are better equipped to address the realities of these women’s lives.

While Huey and Broll did a fantastic service to participants by centering their voices in-text, it would have been beneficial for them to take a more balanced approach by selecting particular moments in-text where their own voices were also highlighted. For instance, the authors’ arguments could have been made more explicitly and dispersed throughout rather than being concentrated primarily at the end, and their recommendations could have come (or at least have been more alluded to) earlier in the text. Furthermore, as a reader, I was left wondering what the authors’ thoughts were on several subjects such as why the majority of participants rejected questions that concerned race (17) despite the well-known fact that poverty is both gendered and racialized (Comack, 2018). Also, I was curious why many participants had diagnoses of post-traumatic stress disorder, but not depression or anxiety despite much higher rates of the latter disorders (59), which may have important implications for psychological assessments and labeling of such populations. Indeed, projects such as Huey and Broll’s could have benefited from a more explicitly critical race and feminist theoretical engagement with the findings that take intersectionality into account. This could have added to readers’ understandings of participants’ lives, especially given that the vast majority of participants were African American and liv-

ing in a country with a lengthy history of slavery and racism (Davis, 2003). Lastly, I was troubled by the continuous use of the term ‘homeless women’ as, too often, such labels act as primary identity markers, and women experiencing homelessness are so much more than simply homeless.

Overall, *Becoming Strong* is an insightful and useful work for those who seek a more nuanced understanding of women’s experiences of violent victimization and homelessness, how experiences of violence relate to homelessness, and what strategies these women employ to cope with experiences of violence and homelessness. Given the topic, as well as Huey and Broll’s recommendations, this book may be of particular interest to service providers such as social workers, shelter workers, counsellors, and anyone working or researching with women experiencing homelessness and/or violence.

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