

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Marie C. Croll, *Following Sexual Abuse: A Sociological Interpretation of Identity Re-formation in Reflexive Therapy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008, 192 pp. \$40.00 hardcover (0802097723)

Marie C. Croll's *Following Sexual Abuse* pursues two aims. First, a reflexive analysis of therapeutic accounts gathered from four sexually abused girls/women provides windows into harrowing recollections of abuse, shattered selves, and journeys (through dreams, symbols, written accounts, and narration) towards a new understanding and a more integrated self. Second, Croll aims to explain, justify and reconcile — to her readers and herself — her multiple roles as therapist/practitioner and sociologist/researcher.

I will start with what I consider to be the weaker pursuit of the book: attempts to justify therapist/mediator *and* sociologist/researcher/participant observer (and even theorist) roles. Despite repeated attempts to dovetail these multiple roles and Croll's insistence on their complementarity, the tensions from wearing too many hats remain. Two main weaknesses arise from carrying too many roles across disciplines. First, an in-depth review of existing research is much more important in the sociologist/researcher role than it may be in the therapist/mediator role. Croll underscores the importance of more scholarly attention to sexual abuse, with which all violence researchers will heartily agree. However, she then erroneously states that most studies treat sexual abuse as a strictly personal and isolated suffering, neglecting many recent works that link personal, interpersonal, social, and structural elements in sexual violations. Regrettably, the review of the literature ends in the late 1990s, and only three publications since 2000 on sexual abuse are cited in the bibliography. A therapeutic practice can perhaps build insights on its own, but sociological research requires much more vigilance on keeping up with both the theoretical and the empirical literature. A new critique in one discipline may be an established critique in another.

Second is the tension of confidentiality/anonymity expectations in therapy versus research, and the difficulty with after-the-fact justifications. I believe that the sanctity of the therapy environment is of utmost importance. Clients, especially those dealing with past or current violence, expect and deserve absolute confidentiality in order to regain trust

in themselves and in others, as Croll herself states. In social sciences, researchers are also bound by ethical requirements of conducting research with human participants, amongst which avoiding deception, clearly defining the goals of research, promising and insuring confidentiality/anonymity only when that assurance can be delivered, and prior informed-consent are paramount. I felt uneasy about blurring expectations, and possibly overstretching not one but both of the disciplinary boundaries in this book. We are told that all four clients enthusiastically agreed to have their stories, narrations, and dreams become part of this book. The problem is that these revelations were divulged in the confines of therapy. Croll assures the readers that her request to use therapy materials came only *after the termination* of therapy, which begs the question of what will happen if any one of these clients needs to return to therapy. The good-will of both the author and the four clients/participants notwithstanding, I still feel discomfort about the broader implications of this practice. Does after-the-fact consent have implications for those who are continuing therapy? Will others fear that they too may be under observation for research purposes? Does end of therapy signal rewriting of rules? From the sociological point of view, is it not a form of deception for the therapist to consider her/himself as a sociologist/researcher/participant observer without informing his or her clients of this multiplicity? How is the prior informed-consent expectation justified in this situation? Does the end (getting social research insights from a therapeutic situation) justify the means ("hidden" researcher role of the therapist)? Since Milgram's and Zimbardo's studies on conformity and influence, social scientists have become more vigilant on ethical implications. This vigilance is all the more essential in research with vulnerable populations. Croll states "my role in this process was essential and clear to me" (p. 3). Was it also clear to her clients/participants?

Despite these reservations, the therapeutic accounts of the four cases are insightful. In Chapter 2, we learn about Jesse's impoverished childhood, her witnessing extreme violence against pets, the father-daughter incest she endured, the indignation of not being believed by her mother or the police, and her difficult search for meaning and coherence in her life. She also has to find her way outside of the descriptions that define her victimization. Croll's account of Jesse's narrative — at first, through vulnerable pet and plant symbols in her dreams, then through the development of a voice on her own — is eloquent and moving. Jesse's struggle to rebuild a coherent sense of self from her paralyzing past speaks volumes about her own resilience, but also mirrors the struggles of countless other victims of incest.

In Chapter 3, we meet Dee, a victim of gang rape who has since struggled with self doubt, blame, and isolation, as well as the self-fulfilling prophecy of accepting the negative definitions of others that leads her into additional exploitative/abusive relationships. Dee's struggles with these negative socially imposed self-definitions unfolds as a moving narrative. However, in my judgment Croll's overinterpretive presence, reflections, and continual justifications for her therapist/researcher roles (despite her promise to keep her "own presence" as a researcher/therapist in the background) compete with Dee's story more than they add to it.

In Chapter 4, we read about Lauren, who was incestually victimized by her brother between the ages of five and 10, and later on abused by her grandfather, and some other men. Exceptionally touching in Lauren's case is her initial inability (or refusal) to talk about her experiences, although she herself has sought the therapy encounter. Gradually, we read about her written notes about her anguish (including a note about the fraternal rape), and her long struggle in finding her own voice/authority. We again witness the silence that the society imposes on all sexual violations, and the crippling silence victims learn to impose upon themselves. Lauren's attempt to regain her voice epitomizes the courage, the desire, and the resulting ability to define oneself outside of the traditional definitions that are imbued with cultural marginalization.

I found Chapter 5 to be the most insightful. It is about Annie, whose memories of sexual abuse are so few, and so fragmented, that one may (erroneously) argue there is no story at all. Despite intense efforts to regain her memories, and despite the supportive milieu of the therapy setting, Annie's recollections never reach a coherent picture. This is where Croll's contribution to the literature needs to be recognized. For members of a society that value completions, clear beginnings and ends, logic and rationale, order, and clarity, it is easy to question, challenge, and even dismiss stories that do not fit the mold. Even as social scientists, we are uncomfortable outside of the realms of logic, reliability, and validity that we have been trained to strive for and expect. However, almost all, and especially the child victims of violence, utilize strategies and schemes to cope with the degrading invasions they have endured. It is no wonder that some memories are suppressed, hidden, fragmented, and out of sequence. When "truth" is defined in rigid ways, people who cannot recall the details of their victimization are revictimized. In searching for the "truth," scientists prefer the clearest, most undisputable observations to buttress their models and theories. Yet the rupture due to sexual invasions may only leave bits and pieces of truths, shadowy recollections and fractured memories. In Annie's case, and despite her efforts to remember, her recollections are basically limited to a man in a closet.

In social sciences and therapeutic settings, understanding and accepting this fragmentation is as vital as adhering to more robust measurements of “truth.”

In sum, the power of the four narratives make this book a worthy read. However, its relatively dated literature review and ambiguous adherence to social science research expectations leave me uneasy. It is important to link the intrapersonal and the social/cultural dimensions in understanding the aftermath of violence, but other books, articles, and studies have already crossed that bridge.

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