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Book Review: Victims as Offenders: The Paradox of Women's Violence in Relationships

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Victims as Offenders: The Paradox of Women's Violence in Relationships. Susan L. Miller. 2005. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 175 pp. \$62.00 (Hardback). \$22.95 (Paperback).

Reviewed by Rachel Kalish¹

Intimate partner violence has emerged as a serious topic of debate among social scientists. Significantly more research has focused on prevalence than about the context of this violence. The controversy over “gender symmetry” relies on debates about the utility of family conflict research. Susan Miller enters this debate with *Victims as Offenders: The Paradox of Women's Violence in Relationships*. Miller situates her argument in the criminal justice system, and can fill the contextual gap. “Contextualizing intimate violence – whether heterosexual or same-gender – makes paramount the inclusion of a host of factors, both personal and societal, that help us understand the use, motivation, and consequence of violence” (26).

Miller acknowledges that women may be violent, but shows how women's use of violence differs greatly from that of men. Her research, in one Mid-Atlantic state, used a three-tiered approach to assess the context of women's violence, as well as the opinions of those who interface with these women. She engaged in participant observation with police, participant observation of a female offender's counseling group, and conducted interviews with professionals such as prosecutors, probation officers, and domestic violence workers, and with women who were arrested for domestic violence. Miller found that although women are arrested for domestic violence the system fails to acknowledge the contexts for and reasoning behind this violence. Changes in police procedures, which are designed to prevent fatalities and the resulting litigation, have removed officers' discretion in domestic violence incidents. Due to this change, women are being arrested for defensive violence, or reactive violence in which they are not the primary aggressor. In other cases, women are being arrested in dual arrests in which the police do not attempt to ascertain the primary aggressor and instead arrest both parties.

Miller begins the book with a review of gender symmetry literature. She discusses the types of research that are used to reach conclusions on both sides. She then points out the specific focus of such research to illuminate the benefits of a triangulated research approach so that “multiple perspectives can be evaluated” (37). Miller adds gender into the debate, specifically discussing how gender, as well as race and class, play a part in making violence appear to be an available behavior in familial situations. Through the interviews with police and service providers, she shows how gender-neutral laws can make it seem as if women and men in relationships are on equal footing, but the interview material also demonstrates that these providers themselves recognize the differences inherent in women's violence.

The addition of gender into a debate that is so much about gender, but simultaneously ignorant of it, is refreshing. Miller discusses the differences between instrumental violence and expressive violence, and points to the ways in which the criminal justice system procedurally remains blind to these differences. Recognizing gender differences in the use of violence is imperative to fully illuminate the issue. The

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interview data, specifically that with the police, shows how the officers themselves see a gender differential in the motivations of women's violence, but they are bound by the law to make arrests. For example, she writes of the respondents:

Most did not see women as primary aggressors, and *no one felt that women were able to achieve the power and control over their male partners that are typically in place in relationships where the male batters the female.....*What is most telling is how many respondents from both groups [police and criminal justice professionals] mentioned that they do not encounter male 'victims' who are 'bloody, bruised, and broken' the way they find female victims. (89, emphasis added)

She does include race and class differences, but this is a part of her argument she could have explored further. Also omitted are interviews with the male partners of the female arrestees. Furthermore, Miller could have addressed the determination of the primary aggressor. Readers unfamiliar with criminal justice procedures may not be aware of the ability of law enforcement to rely on this legal statute designed to avoid dual arrests. Primary aggressor guidelines are frequently part of criminal procedure law, and they allow past violence, defensive injuries, and propensity toward violence (in other words, context) to be factored in to the determination of who to arrest.

Miller's book is a welcome addition to the discussion of intimate partner violence. While she does not add much to the discussion of prevalence, she adds a great deal to the interpretation of women's violence, specifically focusing on the legal system. Prevalence rates can vary greatly based on the type of research conducted. Using a qualitative analysis, Miller allows a look into the differences in women's violence. She does this in a way that does not deny women's violence, but allows greater insight into the ways women use violence, which can improve service provision for women who are arrested for intimate partner violence.