

Donald G. Dutton.

Rethinking Domestic Violence.

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Since violence against intimate partners is an ongoing, ever changing problem, numerous scholars, practitioners, and activists contend that we must constantly reflect on our past contributions to the field and develop new ways of understanding and preventing the myriad of highly injurious and sometimes lethal behaviors that typically occur behind closed doors. Further, many sociologists, including those who are feminists, need to enhance their knowledge of psychological perspectives on what is now commonly referred to as “intimate partner violence” (IPV). Indeed, many sections of *Rethinking Domestic Violence*, especially Chapters 2, 4, and 15, can help readers learn more about psychological theories, research, and treatment.

One of Dutton’s key assertions is that most perpetrators of IPV have personality disorders and that “This reality has been concealed by misleading theories that wife assault is normatively acceptable, an absurd assertion without empirical support” (p. xi). Dutton further argues that psychoeducational groups are highly problematic and therefore, “Public policy must be driven by recognition of attachment-based personality disorder as central to therapeutic change” (p. xi). He presents much empirical evidence to support his contentions; still, a substantial amount of the material included in his book is likely to preclude constructive dialogue and debate between scholars who assert that violence is a property of the individual and those who contend that it is a gendered social problem. For example, scattered throughout *Rethinking Domestic Violence* are numerous sharp attacks on feminist scholarship and practice. Consider his claim that feminist psychoeducational models of batterer intervention heavily informed by the Duluth, Minnesota Model are similar to “thought reform practiced by the Maoist Red Guards” (p. 320).

Dutton argues that, “If we really want women (and men) to be safe, we must take a broader and more enlightened view of this complex problem” (p. xi). However, he dismisses many recent important contributions made by feminist scholars, activists, and practitioners. For example, in Chapters 5 and 6, Dutton devotes considerable space to criticizing early feminist offerings, and readers unfamiliar with the extant theoretical and empirical literature on woman abuse are likely to get the impression that feminist scholars have said little, if anything, about this problem after the late 1980s. Nothing can be further from the truth. While it is beyond the scope of this review to summarize feminist literature produced since the late 1970s, it cannot be emphasized enough that all leading experts in the field constantly face the major challenge of keeping up-to-date with current feminist theories and research generated around the world.

Dutton also incorrectly describes feminist positions on criminal justice responses to intimate violence. He portrays most feminists as strongly favoring punitive measures, which is clearly not the case. Of course, some do demand mandatory arrest and prosecution policies, but many feminists call for coordinated, collaborative, community-based initiatives, while simultaneously struggling for broader social change. It is well known that feminists were among the first to be highly skeptical of the effectiveness of criminal justice initiatives because they often mirror the broader social forces that contribute to sexual assault, beatings, femicide, and other variants of gender violence.

Dutton’s attempt to advance the value of psychological scholarship and treatment is sidetracked by his preoccupation with denouncing feminism. Moreover, he blames feminists for what he perceives

to be the lack of attention given to psychological perspectives. According to him, “Important aspects of abusiveness (personality disorder, attachment disorder, identity disturbance, and shame experiences have been overlooked because of a feminist ideology that eschews psychological causes” (p. 349). This is another example of his problematic review of ongoing, interdisciplinary contributions to the field. Anyone who regularly reads *Violence Against Women: An International and Interdisciplinary Journal* knows that scholars from a broad range of disciplines are joining together to examine how macro-level and psychological forces function in concert to threaten women’s health and safety in intimate relationships. Certainly, today, there is much less paradigm hostility than that described by Dutton.

Although feminists have strengthened a social scientific understanding of woman abuse and have helped curb this problem, current U.S. and Canadian federal governments are rejecting feminist recommendations and are creating policies that are explicitly anti-feminist. For example, in 2006, Status of Women Canada removed the word “equality” from its list of goals. Still, Dutton claims that “mainstream governments came to support domestic violence policy based on radical feminism” (p. 153). To the best of my knowledge, there is no conclusive evidence to support this assertion, while there is ample evidence showing that the governments led by Prime Minister Stephen Harper and President George W. Bush are intent on buttressing the efforts of fathers’ rights groups and other conservative movements that fundamentally oppose feminist scholarship and practice.

Much more can and will be said about *Rethinking Domestic Violence*. Nevertheless, it is not likely to influence many progressive sociologists to rethink their own positions on the plight of abused women. Even so, in a current political economic climate characterized by an intense right-wing assault on feminism, there is an enormous audience for this book and it undoubtedly will be used to justify erroneous claims such as “women are as violent as men” and to challenge feminist efforts to reduce all forms of gender inequality.

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