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Book Review

Rethinking Domestic Violence

By Donald G. Dutton

Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 2006

In the preface of *Rethinking Domestic Violence*, author Donald G. Dutton expresses disdain for "attempts to prolong an ideological view" of intimate partner violence (IPV), noting that a "broader and more enlightened view of this complex problem" is warranted (p. xi). Thus, it is puzzling that in the 350 pages that follow this pronouncement, Dutton both advances an ideological view of IPV (in which women "use violence in intimate relationships to the same extent as men, for the same reasons, and with largely the same results" [p. ix]), and fails to adopt a particularly broad perspective (asserting instead that IPV results from individual-level, psychological causes such as attachment-related disorders). More troublingly, in supporting his arguments Dutton goes to great pains to distort and discount feminist IPV scholarship, laying bare his own efforts at agenda advancement in the process.

First, an overview of the book: The introductory chapter provides a brief history of spousal assault, and is followed by chapters outlining various theories of IPV causation, including nested ecological theories, psychiatric/psychological theories, and feminist/sociological theories. (It should be noted, though, that these theories are not given equal consideration; while the discussion of psychological theories is complex and comprehensive, Dutton points out the "essential flaw" of feminist theories in the opening paragraph of the chapter.) Subsequent chapters address specific issues in IPV research, including "The Gender Debate and the Feminist Paradigm," "The Domestic Assault of Men," and "Subtypes of Perpetrators," among others. The penultimate chapters analyze responses to IPV including both criminal justice system and treatment-based interventions, while the final chapter offers Dutton's "bottom line": namely, that IPV is best explained by psychological factors and that feminism has been detrimental to our understanding of and response to IPV.

This text has serious limitations, both pedestrian (disorganization and poor editing make for a somewhat confusing and repetitive read) and provocative (his criticisms of feminism are stereotypical and sloppily-researched). With respect to the latter, DeKeseredy & Dragiewicz (2007) recently offered a thoughtful, reasoned response to Dutton's work that prospective readers of *Rethinking Domestic Violence* are strongly encouraged to consult. In their commentary, DeKeseredy & Dragiewicz expose Dutton's anti-feminist bias by observing that he engages in tired, outdated criticisms of feminism, pits feminism against empiricism as if the two were mutually exclusive, and ignores virtually all contemporary feminist IPV research – particularly that which contradicts his (inaccurate) characterization of feminist scholarship. He also uses an artificially narrow definition of IPV that is limited only to physical violence and that, by excluding behaviors common in male-to-female abuse such as threats and control tactics, conveniently bolsters his claims of gender symmetry in IPV.

As a feminist IPV researcher, I share the concerns raised by DeKeseredy & Dragiewicz about this book. However, let me be very clear about one point: it is not Dutton's opposition to feminism per se with which I take issue. On the contrary, Dutton has every right to disagree with feminist interpretations and explanations of IPV, and to provide theoretical and methodological critiques of feminist scholarship in his work. However, one expects that such critiques would evidence an actual reading and understanding of the feminist literature, not consist of careless generalizations based on a handful of decades-old studies. Dutton's criticisms of feminist IPV research (and

of feminism in general) are dismissive, disingenuous, and of dubious veracity, and only serve to undermine the potential contributions of his analysis. Although Dutton reviews numerous studies to support his arguments that IPV is gender symmetric and rooted in psychological causes, it is difficult to take seriously the work of a scholar who so blatantly discredits an entire body of scholarship that, it scarcely bears mention, tends to refute his own conclusions.

Despite Dutton's claims to the contrary, this text offers neither a broad nor an especially enlightened view of IPV. Rethinking Domestic Violence is polemic masquerading as positivism; as such, individuals seeking a measured and insightful analysis of IPV are advised to look elsewhere.

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References

DeKeseredy, Walter & Molly Dragiewicz. (2007). Understanding the complexities of feminist perspectives on woman abuse: A commentary on Dutton's Rethinking Domestic Violence. *Violence Against Women*, 13(8), 874-884.

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