

Book Reviews

Battle Cries: Black Women and Intimate Partner Abuse. Hillary Potter. New York: New York University Press. 2008. 273 pp. ISBN 9700814767306. \$23.00 paper.

Battle Cries is Hillary Potter's analysis of interviews with 40 Black women who have left their abusive male partners. The book is rich with these women's perspectives on their own experiences (and often their perceptions of how their experiences differ from those of abused White women), providing us with multiple, concrete reminders that there is no universal woman. The experiences of these particular Black women are the foundation for Potter's most general point: We must not "address intimate partner abuse from a belief that the experiences of this abuse are similar across races, ethnicities, cultures, nationalities, and sexual orientation" (p. 200).

Of course, as with all good qualitative work, this book gets well below such abstractions to illustrate the concrete ways in which the fact that these women are of African descent living in the contemporary United States inflects their experiences. Four substantive chapters are the heart of the book. "Surviving Childhood" covers the women's perceptions of the relevance of their childhood experiences for their adult reactions to abuse. Many of them had experienced or witnessed violence, and those experiences affected them in dramatically different ways. For example, for some of the women, observing the abuse of their mother led to a determination not to live with such abuse themselves, whereas for others, the experience kept them from recognizing their own abuse as quickly as they might have had they grown up in a more peaceful setting. "Living Through It" provides

a rich description of the structure of the abuse the women experienced, a description that validates the long line of feminist research that documents the role of coercive control in male intimate terrorism (Johnson, 2008). "Fighting Back" documents the resistance, both physical and otherwise, that characterizes most of these women. Although Potter emphasizes the cultural tradition of the strong Black woman as a major reason that Black women resist abuse, I was struck more by the extent to which these women's reactions sound very much like those described in other research on women dealing with coercive controlling violence. Despite Potter's tendency to label every behavior of these women as resistance, I strongly recommend the chapter as a rich discussion of the meaning and dynamics of resistance for these Black women. I have argued elsewhere that violent resistance is one of the most understudied types of intimate partner violence, and Potter's book is an important contribution to that literature. "Getting Out" is the final substantive chapter. It is the longest chapter in the book and discusses the diverse and complicated paths by which these women escaped from their abusers. Again, I would argue that most of this process is similar to that described in other studies of women who have left their abusers (e.g., Kirkwood, 1993) but with elements that are specific to the experiences of African American women. For example, a number of the respondents reported that they were concerned about the stigma of being another single Black mother or were worried that if they left their partner they would deprive their children of a male role model—in short supply in their communities.

The substantive chapters make *Battle Cries* a particularly rich addition to the research

literature regarding (a) the dynamic and creative means by which women cope with intimate partner abuse and (b) the particular perspectives of African American women on that experience. In my view, *Battle Cries* is for that reason essential reading for professionals in the field, both researchers and practitioners. Two major concerns, however, temper my positive feelings about the book. First, the book did not get the editing it deserved. I found myself frequently confused by the author's sentences or lines of argument, and it was not unusual for me to conclude that I was indeed dealing with contradictions and non sequiturs. Potter has important things to say, and I wish her editor had worked more with her to make them clear.

My second concern is more substantive—Potter's analysis might lead some readers to fall into a false homogenization of Black women and an exaggerated contrast with White women. In my view, Potter's focus on the strong Black woman and dynamic resistance led her to neglect the evidence that (a) abused women's behavior shows considerable individual variability, even within this relatively homogeneous sample (Black women who have left their abusers), and (b) much of what she reports echoes the findings of other studies of women's responses to intimate partner violence.

The problem of false homogenization arises with respect to Potter's tendency to include under the rubric of dynamic resistance almost any behavior that her respondents reported as a reaction to violence or other abuse. Despite all of the women having left their abusers, there was still evidence throughout their narratives that resistance was not always the dominant response. For example, one respondent said, "There was nothing in my head that told me to get away. Nothing said, 'This isn't right. He doesn't love you. Get away'" (p. 144). Perhaps the overextension of the concept of resistance in this book comes from a lack of clarity about the difference between action and self-perception. When I think of resistance, I think of behavior, whereas Potter's discussion of dynamic resistance sometimes suggests that, for her, it is more about self-image than about action: "The term is employed because of battered Black women's experiences and perceptions, including (a) their not seeing themselves as victims and their not being seen as victims; (b) their self-perceptions as fighters . . . against abuse by intimate partners; (c) their self-perception as Strong Black Women; and (d) their

personal and ancestral history as Black women who have been confronted with and have resisted continuous sociostructural, cultural, and familial obstacles" (p. 52).

With respect to the exaggerated contrast with White women, I would point out that this book continues a long line of work that has established that battered women in general are active and resourceful in response to their abuse (e.g., Gondolf & Fisher, 1988). Nevertheless, Potter at times seems to imply that her concept of dynamic resistance applies only or primarily to Black women, whom both Potter and her respondents contrast with allegedly "passive" (p. 31) and "pampered" (p. 28) White women. I wish Potter had been more careful about reminding us that her respondents' perceptions of differences are not evidence of real differences. For example, some of her respondents were convinced that White women stay longer in abusive relationships than do Black women, and Potter seems to accept their view, even though one of her own footnotes (at the back of the book) presents evidence of the opposite (p. 232 n. 3). The general literature on battered women, which is based largely on samples dominated by White women, clearly establishes that White women do resist and escape from their coercively controlling partners.

Although I expect that much of her analysis would also apply to White women, there is one respect in which the resistance reported here clearly is specific to Black women—the unrelenting influence of the stereotype of the strong Black woman. The effects of that stereotype (as held by the women themselves and by others) permeates these women's experiences, from their own interpretations of their behavior to the way others treat them when they seek help. Potter points out that the strong-Black-woman stereotype is both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, it encourages some women to resist and ultimately to escape. On the other hand, it sometimes "interfere[s] with seeking assistance" (p. 191).

Finally, I have to say that there is an element of irony in the possibility that Potter's suggestion that "even Black women who . . . are severely dominated and controlled without resisting can still exude dynamic resistance" (p. 55) contributes to the very stereotype that is the core of her analysis. Thus, although I would highly recommend this book to professionals in the field, I would be less sanguine about assigning

it to a more naive audience, for fear that a surface reading of it might reinforce inclinations to assume that all Black women are strong Black women.

REFERENCES

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