Family Violence and the Caring Professions

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© Christine Hallett, Stephanie Wheeler, Jim Ogg and Jonathan Dickens,
Norman Johnson, Jan Pahl, Siobhan Lloyd, Chris Phillipson and Simon Biggs,
G. C. H. Bennett 1995

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This book is overdue. It offers to British readers for the first time a systematic analysis of abuse to three different categories of people – children, spouses/partners (usually women) and old people – and offers a valuable comparison of the three. Even that bald description hints at the difficulties with which the editors had to grapple. Is it ‘ageist’ to separate out old people from other adults? What about adults with particular disabilities, especially learning difficulties? And so on. It is a minefield, conceptually and ethically. But all the more credit is due for the decision to grasp the nettle.

The specialist focus on specific groups in nearly all of the literature so far is understandable. Different political and social issues have been on the agenda, different professionals and workers engaged in different ways. However, there was clearly a pressing need for an overview, academically and professionally. The strength of the book is that it does not attempt to ‘emulsify’ the three groups but tackles each in turn, drawing out in its conclusions, similarities and differences. I have been puzzled in the past by the apparent reluctance to do this. In some quarters, notably governmental, there may be a fear that comparisons of other abuse with child abuse may open a Pandora’s Box of trouble and unleash demands for resources. Amongst some academic and professional specialists with elderly people may be a reluctance to get sucked into the world of child abuse which has been so dominant and so voracious. The field of domestic abuse has been less professionalised (an interesting phenomenon in itself) and this has led to a curious split in thought between violence to women and violence to children – so often occurring in the same family and caused by the same man. The ‘discourses’ have run parallel but have not met in any significant way.

Whatever explanations one advances, the result is unfortunate. It is not a question of stressing similarities; it is a question of using the knowledge and experience gained from one field of study to illuminate

another. This book offers rich opportunities to do this and it is particularly useful to have the health and social perspectives presented in turn. Again, rarely do we see these side by side in the same book.

There would seem to be six dimensions in which comparisons are fruitful. These concern: social attitudes to the phenomenon; definitions of it; etiology; the development of a policy response, including law and procedures; assessment processes; and intervention, including evaluation. Each in turn reveals similarities and differences which affect the course of events. For example, it is clear that the plight of abused old people has not raised the same social concern as that of children – which suggests fundamental differences in the value accorded to the two groups. Yet we can also usefully remind ourselves that the level and extent of denial of varying dimensions, including sexual, of child abuse only two or three decades years ago may parallel contemporary reluctance to grapple with this in the field of elder abuse.

Again, in relation to domestic violence, definitions and etiology have been dominated by the feminist paradigm of patriarchal domination, to a far greater extent than the other two groups. Yet this should remind us, first, that a significant number of ‘old-age abuse’ cases simply carry on a long-standing pattern of marital violence and, secondly, that this way of looking at the phenomenon has a great deal to say to us in relation to child abuse.

When we consider the highly developed law available to us in child protection and the woeful inadequacy of protective law for adults, we have tested legal models to consider (do we want emergency protection orders? for example) but also a responsibility to acknowledge the difference between children and adults in terms of concepts of legal competence with a crucially differing balance between autonomy and protection.

More generally, how can we ensure that assessment of elder abuse takes its proper place within the general framework of community care without excessive prominence, as has happened in child abuse, and that it does not become procedurally driven to the detriment of a sensitive professional response?

These are simply brief examples designed to show how fruitful comparisons are in stimulating high-quality debate among academics and professionals. What is now needed is for specific areas of comparison to be further developed. This book offers numerous such opportunities. It should be warmly welcomed.

Olive Stevenson
Professor of Social Work Studies

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