

## Book review

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*The Psychology of Female Violence: Crimes against the Body*, 2nd edn. By A. Motz. (Pp. 388; £19.99; ISBN 9780415403870 pb.) Taylor & Francis: Colchester. 2008.

Reading *The Psychology of Female Violence* is not a comfortable experience. It is well-written, interesting and theoretically incisive, but it is at times so horrific in its case examples that it becomes difficult to keep reading and maintain a thinking stance. Herein lies its value, as I realized that my own reaction to the subject matter highlighted Motz's main point throughout the book: we as a society struggle with the idea of female violence, particularly those acts of violence perpetrated by mothers against their children. Socially female violence is taboo and not openly spoken about. Something about women perpetrating acts of violence contrasts too strongly with our idea of the idealized feminine or maternal figure and renders our acceptance of it difficult if not impossible. The inability to think when faced with such violence is a phenomenon that, Motz argues, happens in society generally but also in treatment facilities, potentially impacting on how these cases are managed.

This is the second edition of the book and in presenting case material and theoretical insights, Motz, a clinical and forensic psychologist, draws on her vast clinical experience and includes updated research findings and recent, pertinent case material. She explores the complex dynamics and unconscious factors at play in female violence either directed against the self or against the child. The book's subtitle reflects Motz's assertion, grounded in psychodynamic theory, that unlike male perversion, female perversion is internalized and plays out in the whole female body and in the extensions of this body, namely the children it produces. Females use their bodies (and sometimes those of their children) to express emotion, perpetrate violence and communicate what cannot be spoken. Classically these forms of female violence have been overlooked. Motz draws on attachment theory and a feminist understanding to supplement a psychodynamic exploration of the causes and expressions of female violence.

The book is divided into four parts. The first three parts explore the different areas of violence perpetrated by women, namely, 'Violence against children', 'Violence against the self' and 'Violence

against others'. The last part focuses on clinical applications of the theory for professionals working with women who commit violent acts.

Violence against children takes many forms, from sexual and physical abuse to fabricated or induced illness and at the extreme infanticide. Offering rich psychodynamic understandings, Motz delves deeply into the development of maternal abuse and the unconscious forces which are triggered by pregnancy and becoming a mother. She highlights the inter-generational transmission of violence and the concept of the perpetrator as herself a victim. Commentary, from a feminist standpoint is made on women's traditional lack of influence and power in society and how this impacts on the development of female violence in the home. Motz also looks at the taboos of maternal incest and violence and questions our social assumptions about motherhood.

The chapter on 'Violence against the self' looks at deliberate self-harm and anorexia nervosa and Motz presents valuable psychodynamic understandings of the dynamics that lie behind these attacks on the body, where, in both cases, the woman places her identity within her body. Self-harming serves to convert psychic pain into somatic pain in order to deal with psychological conflicts or crises, while anorexia nervosa is conceptualized as a complex and violent attack on the adult female body. Motz contrasts and critiques psychodynamic and psychiatric models of self-harm and gives a useful summary of the treatment models available, including a review of dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT). The multifaceted aetiology and varied factors at play in anorexia nervosa are explored broadly and the chapter includes discussion of family dynamics, sexual abuse, socio-cultural and feminist links to the disorder. Motz also comments on pro-anorexia and pro-bulimia websites.

'Violence against others' focuses specifically on battered women who end up killing their abusive partners and Motz uses an understanding of the complex dynamics of abusive relationships to help explain what impels battered women to kill. A useful discussion of courtroom defences and legal issues in such cases forms part of the chapter.

Most valuable is Motz's closing chapter on working with violent women. Motz explores the varied anxieties and intense reactions of professionals working closely with these women. It highlights, from a practical and psychodynamic view, the difficulties we as professionals face in 'seeing', accepting and acting

on instances of abuse and the importance of regular training and supervision of staff working closely with such cases. Motz goes on to question whether the traditionally masculine forensic systems meet the unique psychological needs of violent women and she highlights the importance of integrating therapeutic services to create programmes designed to

understand and work with these women. Motz's book goes a long way in developing a better understanding of female violence and will be beneficial in the optimal confinement and treatment of women who commit such acts.

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