Marie C. Croll
Following Sexual Abuse: A Sociological Interpretation of Identity Re-formation in Reflexive Therapy.
$40.00 hardcover (0802097723)

Croll’s book follows two pursuits: First, is a reflexive analysis of therapeutic accounts gathered from sexually abused girls/women (total of four). Chapters 2 to 5 provide selected windows into the harrowing recollections of abuse, the shattered selves of girls/women, and their journey (through dreams, symbols, written accounts and narration), towards a new understanding and a more integrated self. Second, Croll aims to explain, justify and reconcile—I believe, to her readers and to herself—her chosen multiple roles as a therapist/practitioner and a sociologist/researcher (Introduction, Ch. 1 and Conclusion). In this second pursuit, I found the book weaker, full of redundancies, methodologically porous, and some of its arguments defensive. I am also uneasy about combining many, sometimes colluding roles.

I will start with what I consider to be the weaker pursuit of the book: attempts to justify therapist/mediator and sociologist/researcher/participant observer roles. At one point, Croll attributes yet another role (theorist) for herself (p. 32). Despite repeated attempts to dovetail these multiple roles and Croll’s insistence on their complimentarily, the tensions in wearing too many hats remain obvious. Specifically, the tension dominates the long introduction and the 1st chapter. Let me highlight some weaknesses arising from carrying too many roles, across disciplines:

1. In-depth review of existing research is much more important in sociologist/researcher role than it may be in therapist/mediator role: In the inside jacket of the front cover (also in introduction), Croll underscores the importance of more scholarly attention on sexual abuse, which all violence researchers will heartily agree. However, she then makes the erroneous statement that most studies treat sexual abuse as a strictly personal and isolated suffering. Although more work is always desirable, many recent works have already gone beyond treating sexual abuse as an individual problem. If the included review was sufficiently interdisciplinary, and more up-to-date, the book would have benefited from work that already interfaces personal, inter-personal, social and structural elements in sexual violations. Regrettably, the review of the literature in this work abruptly ends in the late 1990s, and leaves out recent efforts. In the bibliography (pp. 167-172), I counted only seven references with a 2000+ publication date, and only three of the seven (Newman, 2004; Shearer et al., 2004; Weinbaum, 2004) are on sexual abuse. In my judgment, a therapeutic practice can/might build insights on its own, but a sociological research requires much more vigilance on keeping up with the literature.

2. A new critique in one discipline may be an established critique in another: The 1st Chapter called ‘from inside the whale’ attempts to provide a loosely gathered conceptual/theoretical position. Some feminist thought ranging from Carol Gilligan to Dorothy Smith, a handful of social constructionists, symbolic interactionists are cited to justify the already obvious: need to bridge the intrapersonal and social/cultural processes as a pre-requisite to an in-depth understanding of the
aftermath of sexual violence. Croll spends a long time, first explaining and then dismantling the ‘survivor’ rhetoric. However, if her sociological/feminist reviews were more up-to-date, it would have been clear that similar critiques already exist.

3. The tension of confidentiality/anonymity expectations in therapy versus research, and the difficulty with after-the-fact justifications: I believe that the sanctity of the therapy environment is of utmost importance. Clients, especially those who are dealing with past/current violence expect/deserve absolute confidentiality in order to re-gain trust in themselves and in others. Croll, herself talks about the importance of trust. In social sciences, researchers are also bound by ethical requirements of conducting research with human participants, amongst which, avoiding deception, clearly defining the goals of research, promising/insuring confidentiality/anonymity only when that assurance can be delivered, and prior informed-consent are paramount. In this book, I felt uneasy about blurring expectations, and possibly over-stretching not one but both of the disciplinary boundaries. We are told (p. 9-11) that all four clients, have enthusiastically agreed to have their stories/narrations/dreams to become part of this book. The problem is that these revelations were divulged in the confines of therapy—where the author repeatedly underscores her multiple roles, while her clients are unaware of the multiple roles of their therapist. Croll assures the readers that her request to use therapy materials came only after the termination of therapy, which still begs the question: what will happen if any one of these clients needs to return to therapy? The good-will of both the author and the four clients/participants notwithstanding, I still feel discomfort about the broader implications of this practice. Does the ‘after-the-fact’ consent by four have implications for those who are continuing therapy? Will others start to fear that they too may be under observation for research purposes? Does end of therapy signal re-writing of rules? From the sociological point of view, is it not a form of deception for the therapist to consider her/himself as a sociologist/researcher/participant observer without informing his/her clients of this multiplicity? How is the prior informed-consent expectation justified in this situation? Does the end (getting social research insights from a therapeutic situation) justify the means (‘hidden’ researcher role of the therapist)? Since Milgram’s and Zimbardo’s studies on conformity/influence, social scientists of all genres have become more vigilant on ethical implications. This vigilance is all the more essential in research with vulnerable populations. On page 3, Croll states “my role in this process was essential and clear to me.” My point is, was it also clear to her clients/participants?

The therapeutic accounts of the four cases (the 1st pursuit of the book) are insightful. In Chapter 2, we learn about Jesse’s impoverished childhood, her witnessing extreme violence against pets, the father-daughter incest she has endured, the indignation of not being believed by her mother or the police, and her difficult journey in search of meaning and coherence in her life. She also has to find her way outside of the descriptions that define her victimization. Croll’s account of Jesse’s narrative—at first, through vulnerable pet and plant symbols in her dreams, then through the development of a voice on her own—is eloquent and moving. Jesse’s struggle to re-build a coherent sense
of self from her paralyzing past speaks volumes about her own resilience, but also mirrors the struggles of countless other victims of incest.

In Chapter 3, we meet Dee, who was a victim of gang-rape, and has since struggled with self doubt, blame and isolation as well as the self-fulfilling prophecy of finding herself in situations of additional exploitative/abusive relationships. Dee’s struggle against defining herself outside of the social definitions that have defined her in a negative light, unfolds as a moving narrative. However, and in my judgment, Croll’s over-interpretative presence, reflections and continual justifications for her therapist/researcher roles, compete with Dee’s story more than it adds to it. This interference is despite the assurance on the 1st page of the chapter (p. 89) where Croll promises to place her ‘own presence’ as a researcher/therapist in the background.

In Chapter 4, we read about Lauren who has been incestually victimized by her brother between the ages of five and 10, and later on, by her grandfather, and some other men. What is exceptionally touching in Lauren’s case is her initial inability (or refusal) to talk about her experiences, although she herself, has sought the therapy encounter. Gradually, we read about her written notes about her anguish (including a note about the fraternal rape), and her long struggle in finding her own voice/authority. We again witness the silence that the society imposes on all sexual violations, and the crippling silence victims learn to impose upon themselves. Lauren’s attempt to regain her voice epitomizes the courage, the desire and the self-sufficiency of a society that value completions, clear beginnings/ends, logic/rationale, order, and clarity, it is easy to question, challenge and even dismiss stories that do not fit the mold. Even as social scientists, we are uncomfortable outside of the realms of logic, reliability and validity as we have been trained to strive for and expect. However, almost all, especially the child victims of violence utilize strategies/schemes to cope with the degrading invasions they have endured. It is no wonder that some memories are suppressed, hidden, fragmented and out of order/sequence. When ‘truth’ is defined in rigid ways, people/children who can not (or are not able to) recall the details of their victimization are re-victimized. In searching for the ‘truth’, scientists prefer the clearest, most undisputable observations to buttress their models and theories. Yet, the rupture due to sexual invasions may only leave bits and pieces of truths, shadowy recollections and fractured memories. In Annie’s case, and despite her efforts to remember, her recollections are basically limited to a man in a closet. In social sciences and therapeutic settings, understanding and accepting this fragmentation is as vital as adhering to more robust measurements of ‘truth’.

In sum, due to the power of the four narratives, this book is a worthy read. However, my jury is out in terms of its relatively dated literature review and the ambiguity in adherence to social science research expectations. In terms of the importance of linking the intrapersonal and the social/cultural dimensions in understanding the aftermath of violence, there are books/articles/studies that have already crossed that bridge.
Aysan Sev’er is a Professor of Sociology at the University of Toronto Scarborough. Her work focuses on violence against women, honour-killings and dowry murders, and she is the general editor of Women’s Health & Urban Life peer-reviewed journal. She recently served as the Advisor to the Principal on Equity Issues (2005-08).