Cruel but Not Unusual: Violence in Canadian Families is a collection of readings on violence against women, children and the aged in Canada. The book spans over 500 pages, has an introduction and conclusion by the editors, and is divided into four sections. Three of the four sections are customary for this topic, namely: violence on children, women and the aged. The first section has been reserved for the study of violence and diversity. If any laurels is due to this book, it should be for the inclusion of the chapters on diversity.

Within sections, different authors explore different aspects of violence. There are two chapters on the aged, three on woman, and five each on diversity and children for a total of 15 chapters. Even this simple count may give an indication of the editors’ prioritization of the violence topics, and maybe, also reflect the established priority in the disciplinary affiliation of most authors (social work). Indeed, a perusal of the contributors section (pp. 507-512) shows that a large proportion of the authors are academically young scholars, Ph.D. students, and practitioners in the social work field, with the rare presence of more established academics within social work, psychology or law. Thus, this book is written by and mostly targets an audience of social work students, practitioners, as well as instructors in social work. If the editors Alaggia and Vine intended to have a larger, more interdisciplinary, and more scholarly audience for their book, I suspect that their success will be more modest.

The quality of the chapters within the four sections vary substantially. In the diversity part which I consider to be the strength of this book, the ones that address violence and healing in Aboriginal communities (Baskin) and immigrant and refugee families (Alaggia & Maiter) are interesting. Differential and sensitive focus on the causes and consequences of violence amongst intimates within Canadian diversities is long overdue. Authors of the diversity chapters rightly, and forcefully call our attention to the complexities. Moreover, as Baskin points out, we need to make sure that the safety of women (and children) remains pivotal even when we seek novel, culture-sensitive solutions to gendered victimization.

The section on children also includes some important information. For example, Vine, Trocme & Finlay introduce a meaningful review of the Canadian
Incidence Study (CIS) data. Unfortunately, these data are now nine years old, and the reader wonders about the change in patterns. McGillivray & Durrant introduce a detailed historical analysis on corporal punishment, which is not totally new, but still informative. Likewise, Birnbaum’s comparisons of provincial legislation is also informative, albeit much longer than necessary (pp. 302-324).

On the topic of abuse of older adults, McDonald et al.’s summary article is extensive and useful. Although there is some redundancy for those of us who are already familiar with McDonald’s earlier work (and some overlap with the following Harbison et al. Ch.), McDonald et al. still manage to bring conceptual clarity to a topic which is increasing in its importance in Canada as the baby-boomers approach the retirement age.

I found the whole section on the abuse of women one of the weaker links of this book. The conceptual chapter which attempts to frame women abuse (Todd & Lundy), provides an extensive review but does not go beyond an already discussed (and re-discussed) debates in the literature. To be fair to the authors, these theoretical debates may be still ‘fresh’ for social workers who, by the nature of their work, may be more practice than theory driven. However, the conceptual debates that are rehashed here are a bit too old, tired, and some of the literature reviewed is not even Canadian.

As a feminist sociologist, my deepest disappointment is with the ‘escaping narratives of domination’ chapter (Avis). I admit that this reaction may be partially due to the disciplinary differences between my own discipline of sociology versus intra-personal ‘therapeutic’ approaches. Having worked with women who are victimized by abuse, I also admit that their shattered selves may indeed need lots of support to rid them of the dehumanizing effects of abuse. However, and simultaneously, I prickle against the suggestion that what ‘victims’ need is therapy. When asked, survivors of abuse tell you that they need: a responsive criminal justice system, shelters, temporary and long-term housing, good schools for their children, skills training and guaranteed income. First and foremost, they need safety! Without these crucial aspects of social responsibility and political resolve, all the ‘narrative therapy’ in the world is not going to make a dent in the vulnerabilities women victims of abuse and their children experience. All the ‘narrative therapy’ in the world is not going to help women who are being controlled, stalked, harassed and threatened. Therapy will not
help those who are killed by their abusers either, a scenario which repeats itself about 80-90 times in Canada each year. I think, this chapter unfairly shifts the social gaze away from structural constraints, lack of political will and the responsibility of the perpetrators onto the women themselves.

Despite the variability in the quality of its 15 chapters, this book makes a positive contribution to our understanding of violence amongst intimates, especially in terms of emphasizing the continuum of violence. The literature reviewed in different chapters is often extensive, mostly (but not always) current, albeit often generated through the US rather than Canadian research. One of the glaring weaknesses of the book is the almost complete lack of ‘new’ research carried out and reported by the authors. Most of the 500 plus pages of the book consists of summaries, comparisons and contrasts of research that is already published elsewhere. Those who want to read about new, vigorous, first-hand findings will not find what they want in this book. Relatedly, and perhaps, as a direct consequence of the relative void of new research findings, is the absence of any theoretical advancement. Without contributing fresh research findings, how many authors can review what already exists, how many times without repeating what is already covered? Moreover, most chapters are atheoretical. Even when one finds a theoretical coverage within a chapter (i.e, pp. 130-133; pp. 339-343) the invoked theories are truncated summaries.

In sum, I do recommend this book for university and college libraries. Some chapters may also be suitable for undergraduate teaching. Personally, I will look forward to reading more theoretically grounded, first-hand research results of the many academically young contributors of this collection as their work matures in the violence area.

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