

## Book review

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### **Following sexual abuse: A sociological interpretation of identity re/formation in reflexive therapy**

**Marie C. Croll**

**Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008. 179 pp.**

**ISBN 978-0-8020-9772-9.**

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I was invited to review this book from a practitioner's perspective. I was attracted to it as its title, and a brief skim of some of its content on Amazon.com led me to think it would fit well with my preferred ways of working with clients, having a strong allegiance to the ideas and practices of narrative therapy. I think of myself as a feminist, but have no academic knowledge regarding feminism. However, I credit being part of the feminist consciousness-raising movement in the '70s as a very important formative influence on me.

In addition to the sociological perspective alluded to in the title, Croll also writes from the perspective of symbolic interactionism, of which I have no knowledge, and my study of sociology was at undergraduate level in the '70s. Consequently, given my limited academic background in the fields from which the author draws her theoretical orientation, my criticisms of her book may be based on faulty understandings on my part. Ideally, an additional academic review of this book would be appropriate and also perhaps a review by a practitioner interested in working with dreams as part of therapy.

From a practitioner's point of view, I found this book extremely disappointing, but to be fair, the author's aims appeared to be more related to opening up the detailed and intimate accounts that the therapeutic context provides to sociological analysis – "In short, my desire to give my former clients a sociological representation of their accounts is the principal motivation for writing this book." (p. 1). However, she also presumably was writing to a therapist readership as she states that her initial decision to undertake this work was "to better understand, describe, and disseminate what consistently appeared to succeed in the therapeutic process" (p. 1). Perhaps the author succeeds in her goal regarding sociological representation – I cannot comment on this as I don't have a background in sociology. However, I don't believe she achieved her aim to 'describe and disseminate' her therapy.

Croll laboured the point in the lengthy introduction that in her accounts of the therapy she aimed to be true to the clients' perspectives. "These en-cased, in-depth narratives allow for an accurate representation of the issues, problems, and experiences arising from sexual exploitation, as the clients themselves expressed it" (p. 12). The implication is that she will provide some verbatim accounts of the clients' experiences in therapy. However, the chapters devoted to each of the four cases she follows include very few direct quotes and few 'in-depth narratives', most being descriptions of the clients' abusive experiences or accounts of their dreams. The therapeutic dialogue is not transcribed at all. We have little insight into how Croll works

therapeutically except through her very general analysis of what has transpired in the therapy.

The point of difference, Croll appears to claim in relation to her therapeutic approach, is her use of dreams in therapy. She does not explain in any detail how she works with dreams. It would seem that Croll sees working with dreams as working with a more pure form of expression – “For the client, until a personal symbol has been spoken, it represents meaning that has been unmanipulated from without” (p.26). She states that “symbols provide an exact and crystallized form of communication, perhaps because of their subjective origins and qualities” (p. 20) which suggests a very fixed and objective view of reality – rather at odds with a social constructionist approach.

My main reaction to this book was scepticism and a sense of disjunction between the way Croll writes about her approach to therapy and to her clients, and the theoretical ideas she cites.

The author hints at the virtues of describing women’s experience in a way that reflects their everyday reality that does not render her invisible through marginalising her experiences. To me this implies a desire to employ language of the specific, the particularities of experience. However, her accounts of both the client’s experiences and the therapy are dominated by broad generalisations and loose use of language. Her accounts of the therapy are more psychological than personal. To me this does not fit with the philosophies she is espousing. She criticises the thin and static descriptions of identity encompassed by ‘survivor’ or ‘victim’ yet herself uses broad generalisations and thin descriptions of experience.

The author appears to write from an assumption of the existence of an ‘essential self’ – a self to be ‘re-created’ and ‘repaired’ – yet she makes reference to theories of social construction of the self. She acknowledges the pervasiveness and power of taken-for-granted, dominant and oppressive discourses which influence the construction of self, but doesn’t appear to have integrated this idea well into her approach to therapy. She appears to have an idea that a person’s reality can be ‘accurate’ or otherwise, and doesn’t appear to take on board the pervasive nature of dominant discourses. I find it hard to know where to start when critiquing a statement such as “Governing discourses define my clients, often mostly inaccurately, and untangling them from external projections, at least where their sexual violation is concerned, becomes a therapeutic strategy” (p. 8). I am left unsure as to whether she is not explaining herself well, or whether she failed to understand some crucially important aspects of the theories she claims allegiance to.

Most practitioners have relatively limited time for reading. I took this book on holiday with me to read. Unfortunately, to quote a local TV advertisement, ‘Life is too short to read bad books’. I read the first three chapters, and decided against reading any more. I found myself cringing through much of these chapters, not because Croll’s ideas didn’t agree with mine but because the theories she cited in support of her approach seemed inconsistent with the ideas she was expressing about the nature of identity and the nature of collaborative and reflexive dialogue and reflection within the therapy.

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