



Understanding Violence: Context and Practice in the Human Services.
Ed. Annabel Taylor and Marie Connolly.
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Reviewed by Sue Wootton.

Understanding Violence: Context and Practice in the Human Services

is a collection of multi-disciplinary essays by practitioners and academics, collated and edited by **Dr Annabel Taylor and Professor Marie Connolly.**¹ Any publication that sets out to explain our attitudes towards violence in New Zealand must be welcomed, for, as most of us know, the problem is insidious, widespread and endemic, and its effects at all levels of society are profoundly damaging. This book is promoted as “a reference for professionals, an essential resource for students” and as “of interest to the wider community in explaining community responses to violence.”

As a member of that ‘wider community’, I opened the book looking forward to learning what experts in the field know about this issue. What is the current situation? Who is most at risk of becoming a victim of violence? Who is most at risk of becoming a perpetrator? Is violence in our communities increasing or decreasing? What strategies work to prevent violence? These were the kinds of questions I hoped would be answered, in a clear, concise and informative way. Some grace in the telling would have been a bonus. Unfortunately for the ‘wider community’ of readers (and also, in my view, unfortunately for academics and students who seem to be expected to put up with it), the language and structure of these essays tends to the dry, overwritten and dense. Dense as a fence, in places, one might say, and the resulting barrier to communication makes reading the collection hard work. I’m not saying that the answers to my questions are not in the essays; I think they are. It’s just that many of the sentences are as long as snakes, and bulging with indigestible clichés or poly-syllabic words. It doesn’t help that the text is also sprinkled with proof-reading mistakes such as ‘he’ for ‘the’ (p 170), verbs which don’t match their subjects (“the schools of Aotearoa New Zealand

is by no means exempt” (p 166), or wrong word selection, such as ‘ascribed’ for ‘charged’ on p 176. But the book is for you if you enjoy reading (or have to read, for educational purposes) writing like this: “An analysis of the history of sexual abuse within the church reveals the institutional presence of the elements identified above. In terms of the broader issues in combating sexual abuse as a social concern, these examples of structural and institutional sexual abuse serve to remind us of its contextual nature...” or “In the current environment, female imprisonment and particularly female indigenous imprisonment rates continue to rise in both New Zealand and Australia. Investigation into perceptions of, and responses to, this increase across the two countries, therefore, is of interest to further inform our understanding of the phenomena. While deductive approaches to understanding crime consider various traditional criminological theories to account for rising crime rates, the majority of these approaches assume a deficit within individual offenders. More recent inductive approaches, based on qualitative research methods, are able to generate new theories to help explain the rise in imprisonment rates and move beyond theories about ‘what works’, which tend to locate the responsibility for rising crime rates within individual offenders alone...”

It remains true that *any* book which sets out to cast light on this dark topic is welcome, and I acknowledge that despite the promise of the blurb, I am probably not this collection’s ideal reader. The authors are acknowledged experts in their fields, and the essays cover a range of topics, including restorative justice, violence and the media, women and violence, elder abuse and neglect, gang violence and school bullying. The editors are to be commended for collecting the work together and publishing it as a resource, and the book itself can be recommended to anyone with a specialist and technical interest in the violent reality of our society. For those of us in that ‘wider community’ however, I’d love the editors to think about liberating the clearer book that’s inside this one, struggling to be let out.

1. Dr Annabel Taylor is the director of the Te Awatea Violence Research Centre at the University of Canterbury. Professor Marie Connolly is the Chair and Head of Social Work at the University of Melbourne.