

Lighting the path

Reflections on counselling, young women and sexual assault

REVIEWED BY CAMERON BOYD

Lighting the path: Reflections on counselling, young women and sexual assault. Zig Zag Young Women's Resource Centre, Brisbane

This collection is a unique addition to the Australian sexual assault literature. Written by a range of authors, from experienced researchers to practitioners writing about their own practice, the authors collectively demonstrate that thoughtful, provocative and insightful writing about sexual assault counselling practices need not be dry, jargon-laden or overly technical. Nor do they need to be simplistic, prescriptive or patronising to the reader. In fact, one of the strengths of this collection is its bringing together of a range of styles and approaches, from the theoretical to the poetic.

The book overall holds a commitment to feminist understandings of sexual violence. It is evident that the editors have taken a relatively broad interpretation of feminism, resulting in some productive tensions between (and sometimes within) articles. The book is structured into three sections, headed: 'Reflecting on the context—Feminism, young women and sexual assault'; 'Working with young women in specific settings'; and 'Feminist counselling practice with young women survivors'. While this gives an easy-to-navigate map for those wanting to 'dip in' for a particular issue, I found that it was valuable to notice the interconnections, commonalities and tensions across the articles throughout the book.

Joanne Baker's theoretical chapter, 'Girl power' and its implications for work with young women', sets the political scene, exploring the implications of a neo-liberal, supposedly post-feminist context, in which gender equality is said to have been achieved. This political rhetoric, strongly promoted in the commercial media and advertising images, as well as among self-declared post-feminist writers, promotes images of women and girls as empowered, confident and in control. While such images can be useful in promoting self-esteem for young women, Baker argues they also have the effect of defining vulnerability as a personal deficiency. In this context, young women who have been victims of sexual assault may see their victimisation as a result of their own lack of awareness or strength. The practical implications of this are highlighted in the chapter by Claudia Schiek and Jodie Sloan, 'Reconnecting the threads by challenging the pattern', on overcoming self-blame. They write about the difficulty of naming sexual assault and assigning responsibility to offenders in an environment that encourages young women to think of sexual assault as just 'bad sex'. In a related chapter by Lynne Harriott, 'Town bikes unite', dominant attitudes about women's sexuality, particularly the issue of 'promiscuity', are examined. Harriott encourages workers to engage with 'the meanings that women give to their own experiences of sexuality', especially in the aftermath of sexual violence.

Some common themes emerge across articles, reflecting certain issues that feminist counsellors must engage with in their work with young women. One example is the role of trauma theory, a contested issue in the broader feminist literature. The usefulness and difficulties of trauma theory in understanding the lives of 'young women who grapple with dangerous and alienating behaviours' are emphasised by Jenny Dwyer and Robyn Miller in their chapter, 'Nasty young madams' or 'poor little buggers'. They share the concerns of Erica Fernandez and Kirsty Young ('The world is not black or white, or shades of grey. It is many rich colours') about the totalising identity prescriptions

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that the concept of trauma can allow, where women are 'permanently defined by their experience of trauma'. Felicity Rousseaux ('Talking about the talking'), in a different approach, provides an overview of neurobiological perspectives on trauma, and how an understanding of this assists in creating a context of safety for young women to talk about their abuse. Deb Kilroy, in 'The silent scream of sexual assault', discusses the often-overpowering influence of traumatic experiences and memories in the lives of women in prison, and the very real obstacles to addressing these in a context where expressing vulnerability is dangerous. Kate Harrison and Yonna Powell are adventure-based therapists who, in their chapter 'Learning to set your own boundaries', explain why they 'take a person who has experienced trauma in their lives' and 'scare the wits out of them in a place they have never seen before!' Each of these chapters offers a slightly different perspective on the trauma debate.

Another theme connecting several of the chapters (especially, but not only, in Section 2) is that of space and place. Hannah Moran ('Finding your place'), a non-Indigenous worker working with remote Indigenous communities, highlights the 'history of oppression, institutional racism and pain', and why it is important for a non-Indigenous sexual assault worker to learn about and understand this history for the particular community. Pam Stein's beautiful and powerful chapter, 'Counselling in the car', describes literally kicking up a storm to help young Indigenous women in remote Northern Territory connect with their unspeakable anger at the repeated abuse they experience. In 'Making connections in informal settings', Judy Kulisa highlights the gendered nature of youth-work spaces, and the implications that this has for providing a safe space in which to provide support for young women. Such spaces are historically male-oriented, with youth workers often adopting a 'masculine' style that can inadvertently alienate young women. The effects of place are also explored in other articles about women in prisons (Deb Kilroy—see above), adventure-based therapy group work ('Crawling through caves—Standing tall in the sun' by Stephanie Blake and Maria Katsikas; and also the chapter mentioned above by Kate Harrison and Yonna Powell), and young women's dealings with mental health and psychiatric institutions (Jenny Dwyer and Robyn Miller).

These and other chapters also explore the complexities of counselling with interpreters ('Changes and challenges in the therapeutic relationship when using a counsellor' by Annabelle Allimant, Beatriz Martinez and Eunice Wong), counsellors 'use' of their own personal experiences (Erica Fernandez and Kirsty Young), art therapy (Elaine Pollen), and the narrative approach of 'externalising' self-harm in counselling young women survivors ('Working with young women who self-harm' by Katie Perry).

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As Marg D'Arcy's introduction notes, the book is intended primarily for counsellors with some knowledge and practice experience in the field, but it is also a useful resource for people in the community who are supporting young women who have been sexually assaulted. As a collection, the book convincingly frames sexual assault as a community and societal problem, while also being practically useful for those assisting individual

young women to heal from the violence they have experienced. In doing so, theory and practice are not only linked to each other, but the distinction between the two starts to blur. There is an implicit insistence that theory be made useful, and that practice be thoroughly reflected upon in light of workers' theoretical and political commitments.

Readers who are interested in this book might also like to follow up Zig Zag's other excellent publications, including *Working with young women who self-harm: A resource for workers* by Christy McGuire (2004). Copies of several Zig Zag publications are held at the AIFS library. They can also be ordered through Zig Zag's website, www.zigzag.org.au

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