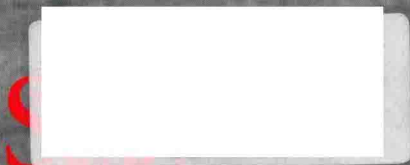


RURAL WOMAN BATTERING AND THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

An Ethnography

Neil Websdale



Sage Series on Violence Against Women



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Sage Series on Violence Against Women

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For Amy and Mia

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The backbone of this book derives from my lengthy conversations with 50 rural battered women, resident in various spouse abuse shelters in Kentucky. They offered up the connective tissue of rural patriarchy and I have benefited from that offering in ways they will not. I thank them.

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Introduction

Over the past decade or so, policymakers have increasingly come to realize the epidemic proportions of violence against women in the home. It is easy to see how one of the alternative pop/folk/rock icons of the past 30 years, Leonard Cohen in his song "Democracy," can wax lyrical about the "homicidal bitchin' " that occurs in the kitchens of family homes over "who will serve and who will eat."¹ Put simply, intimate gender relations in the United States are a lightning rod for assault and homicide. Likewise, these relationships are also marked by enormous psychological tension and antagonism, regardless of whether such hostilities manifest themselves as physical violence. At the same time, many families are the sites of love, intimacy of all kinds, and support for constituent members.

These observations are not new. The research literature on violence between intimates is massive, and continues to grow. My purpose in writing this book is to draw attention to a phenomenon that has received scant research attention: namely rural woman battering and the so-called justice system's response to that violence. One of the reasons for the neglect of woman battering in rural communities is that researchers have ignored rural communities. There may be any number of explanations for this neglect. It is not easy for researchers to study rural communities. Rural citizens tend to be suspicious of outsiders in general. Even conducting research through techniques

such as telephone surveying is more problematic in rural communities because telephone subscription rates can be much lower than they are in cities. Another reason for the dearth of research into rural domestic violence may be the popular tendency to see rural communities as more tranquil than urban ones. This image of tranquillity is not mythical. Rather, it is supported by crime statistics that show much lower levels of violent crimes such as robbery and aggravated assault in rural regions. However, as research reveals, violence within families does not follow the same social patterns as street violence. As I go on to show, rural families seem just as prone to outbreaks of violence against women as their urban counterparts. Take for example the following murder-suicide that occurred in rural Eastern Kentucky.

Myrtle Whitaker survived her husband's attempt to murder her.² Myrtle had been victimized for many years by her husband, Allen Whitaker, Jr., prior to the abusive episode on December 15, 1990, when Allen Jr. tried to murder Myrtle and successfully murdered two of his sons and then killed himself. The couple started dating when he was 18 and she was 16. Myrtle noted that in the early days of their dating "he was good to me" (*Lexington Herald-Leader*, March 27, 1991, p. A6). They married on June 21, 1973 and Myrtle reported that "the next day he changed. . . . He was my boss. I had to do what he said" (*Lexington Herald-Leader*, March 27, 1991, p. A6). In 1981 she left him to live with her parents in a small house in Punccheon Camp hollow in Eastern Kentucky. He arrived at her parents' house a few days later and ordered his wife and children into his truck at gunpoint. As the family left, Allen held a gun to Myrtle's head. Fearing for her life, she told her parents not to call the Magoffin County sheriff. Allen Jr. continued to abuse his wife and children over the years. The family lived in a remote hollow known as Bear Branch. Their house, like other houses in the hollow, had no running water and no indoor toilet, and the nearest road was a mile away. Allen Jr. had a job as a Magoffin County school bus driver and Myrtle received \$614 a month in disability and welfare payments. He controlled his family tightly. According to Myrtle's mother, Susie Prater, "He didn't allow them to talk to nobody . . . just whoever he wanted them to speak to. He wouldn't let her visit nobody" (*Lexington Herald-Leader*, December 30, 1990, p. A10). Arbie "Bubby" Sublett, whose sister married into the Prater family, commented that, "He kept them up in a hollow . . . like cattle" (*Lexington Herald-Leader*, December 30, 1990, p. A10).

Myrtle was ensnared in a network of deeply conflictual family relationships, ambushed by her poverty, and unable to break free in a community that was home to both her own and her abuser's parents and friends. At one point, Myrtle told her sister, Norma Cole, "I ain't got no place to go, no place to stay, no way to make it" (*Louisville Courier-Journal*, December 23, 1990, p. A7).

In spite of her desperate situation, Myrtle planned her escape. On January 19, 1990, she waited until Allen Jr. passed out drunk and then took her two sons and her daughter with her to walk to the mouth of the hollow to use a neighbor's telephone. She called her father, who collected her and the children and subsequently arranged a secret meeting with local police. As a result of this meeting, Allen Jr. was charged with sodomizing his daughter. He was later released on bail. Myrtle moved out to the spouse abuse shelter in the area and then into her sister's house. She obtained a restraining order from the court to limit Allen Jr.'s access to her and her children and began to live a new life. This new life included divorcing Allen Jr. The divorce was due to be finalized within a week or so after the murder-suicide.

On the day of the murder-suicide, Allen Jr. and Myrtle met so that he could take the youngest son to stay with him overnight. Their oldest son, Kermitt, reached for some food to hand to his father. Allen Jr. took the food and put it on the hood of Myrtle's car. He then told Myrtle and the kids that he had a better idea than eating food and started firing his .38 caliber revolver at his family. He killed the two boys and left Myrtle for dead. His daughter escaped. He then reloaded the revolver and shot himself in the head.

Events such as the Whitaker murder-suicide send shock waves through small Kentucky towns. These shock waves are often amplified through the urban presses in Louisville and Lexington. One of the discursive themes of these shock waves is the disturbance of the apparent rural idyll. These rural atrocity tales cast an ominous shadow over a way of life that is locally governed, that shuns outsiders, and in which people's families and friends are often intimately interconnected over generations. However, it is not my point that violence against women in rural communities takes different physical forms from that in urban areas. This book is not an attempt to provide hard quantitative data on the prevalence of battering in rural vis-à-vis urban areas. Rather, the book is a study of interpersonal violence against women within a number of intersecting contexts, one of them being the rural sociocultural milieu.

Rural phenomena are not easy to study using quantitative data sources such as police call data and arrest reports, court convictions, and the like. My use of ethnographic methods, including 96 focused interviews³ and participant and nonparticipant observation is designed to overcome these difficulties and to produce a detailed study of the ways of life in rural areas. Although the details of the Whitaker case were gleaned largely from newspaper sources, in this book I attach central importance to the voices of rural women themselves. I rely on my conversations with criminal justice and other professionals to augment women's own words about their victimization, policing, the courts, and the state in general. In this way I hope to redress some of the imbalance in the research literature on woman battering and criminal justice that, as I will show in Chapter 3, often ignores battered women.

Part of the art of the ethnographer is to identify his or her place amid a labyrinth of social forces and to reflect upon how this locus affects the research. This "situated" stance raised important questions for my research on rural woman battering. By trading on my privilege as a white male college professor, do I invade the territory inhabited by rural battered women, and rural folk in general, as I re-present their words and deeds in text? Am I the ethnographer-invader reproducing the imperialist *modus operandi* of bygone Empires? Recent critiques of ethnographic research have leveled the charge that ethnographers interpret "other" cultures through the lens of the ethnographers' own cultural heritage, thereby engaging in what Michelle Fine calls "imperial translation."⁴

During my own ethnographic research I vacillated between seeing myself as a pro-feminist man researching a hitherto much ignored social problem and a colonizer invading an alien culture. I became what I call the "hesitant ethnographer." These feelings are not unusual, and other ethnographers have wrestled with similar problems. Pinpointing some of the anxieties of conducting ethnographic research in Cuba, Ray Michalowski (1996) shows how the geo-political vortex of U.S.-Cuban relations generates considerable anxiety for him as he negotiates the ebb and flow of political tensions at an interpersonal level.

For some, my ethnography may appear more noble if I assume the master status of activist-ethnographer. But this is not the case. My overwhelming feeling as I rode with police officers, talked with battered women, observed domestic cases in court, and lived in

Eastern Kentucky, was one of awe and bewilderment. I liken it to my 2 years living in Japan after having spent most of my life in England. In Japan the trees, the stores, people's attire and style, language, the color of food, the smell of culture, indeed the entire social fabric, seemed to me to have been inverted. These feelings of awe and bewilderment are doubtless similar to those experienced by the early cultural anthropologists and may not form the basis for writing good sociology. In fact, even reporting my childlike curiosity or voyeuristic tendencies may be seen as either a form of self-indulgence or a type of cynical insurrection by those who would tyrannize all ethnography by manacling it to the lofty goal of producing a just society.

Just as my sense of wonderment at cultural life in rural Kentucky may have been partially influenced by my childhood as a working-class Briton, so too must my curiosity about rural woman battering have been partially shaped by personal inexperience with such matters. Not having grown up in a battering family and not having been a batterer, I cannot speak from the unassailable pulpit of experience on these matters. Indeed, as one of my colleagues recently suggested, I may have been better able to write about battering had I been the perpetrator of such violence, at least at some point during my life.

Since woman battering seems to be as prevalent in rural families as it is in urban families, and because researchers and policymakers have not addressed this disturbing social problem, it is imperative we learn more about it. The search for such knowledge requires an understanding of rural cultural life and the social condition of women. I claim no special expertise in this area, except that I lived, worked, observed, and conversed with people in a small rural town in Eastern Kentucky from 1991 to 1993. It was in that small town and its beautiful hinterland that my ethnography began. By *ethnography* I refer to the "study of ways of life." Eventually, the ethnography spread across the lovely state of Kentucky to encompass a number of rural communities. Amid the green rolling hills of the Bluegrass, the derelict mining towns, the steep mountains of Eastern Kentucky, and the fertile farmland of Central and Western Kentucky, I went in search of intimate violence and the societal reaction to it.

In the fall of 1991, I made contact with and got to know the women who ran the "Washington" spouse abuse shelter. After outlining the broad scope of my research venture and receiving their detailed input, we jointly arranged for me to approach women who were the victims/survivors of interpersonal male violence. The shelter director

told battered women of my research interests and asked if they might be interested in telling their story. Once my first few interviews were completed, women who had talked with me shared their experiences with other women in the shelter, some of whom in turn agreed to share their experiences with me. Having women pass on information about their conversations with me served to introduce me to new interviewees. This snowballing effect also raised trust and comfort levels for both myself and the women I talked with. It is my perception that when men interview women, it is helpful if they are introduced by women and that their research focus is relayed by those women who, ideally, have played an integral part in formulating the research vista.

One dark January night in 1992, I pulled up and parked my car in the trees close to the spouse abuse shelter in Washington. At that time the shelter was somewhat ramshackle. The entry was by a sidedoor and I could not help but think that this door was very easy to break down. The dead-bolt lock appeared insubstantial. I entered to be greeted by the shelter director who introduced me to Barbara, the first woman who expressed a desire to tell her story. I glanced into the administrative office where I saw a security screen that displayed the outside of the premises and particularly the back door, which one worker told me was "very flimsy." The inside furnishings were at best modest and reflected both the poverty of the region and the fact that woman battering was not seen as a particularly serious offense by local government. All of the women in shelter were poor.

The air was thick with cigarette smoke and the house alive with the sound of children playing and crying. One of the women who resided in the shelter bore the marks of physical abuse on her face in the form of a black eye, and on her leg in the form of softened blue/black bruises. Except for Barbara, whom I was about to interview, I was barely acknowledged by the other women residents. Barbara had a scar at the side of her forehead evidenced by streaks of whitish tissue that contrasted sharply with her regular skin color. This scar was the legacy of a stab wound inflicted by her abusive ex-husband. During this first visit to the Washington shelter I sensed I was standing at the feet of patriarchy. The very architecture of the shelter, with the security system, the drawn blinds so as to exclude the hostile world, and the residential language of injury and abuse, evidenced the "reality" of patriarchy. However, this was not a universal patriarchy, but rather a patriarchy nuanced by the silks and rags of class relations and the idiosyncrasies of the rural culture of Eastern Kentucky.

Certainly it was a patriarchy characterized by coercion, violence, and cruelty, but also a patriarchy distinguished by a profound sense of resistance and endurance on the part of battered women.

The centerpiece of my ethnography is the focused interviews I conducted with battered women, police officers, judges, attorneys, social workers, spouse abuse shelter employees and directors, and the leaders of the Kentucky Domestic Violence Association (KDVA). I also engaged in various forms of observation and participant observation that augmented my interview findings and my everyday cultural appreciation. I rode with police officers and observed their performance at domestics. For a year or so, I served on the advisory board of the local spouse abuse shelter and was involved in discussions about how to raise funds and how to alter the architecture of the shelter itself. In another capacity, I acted as an external evaluator of a federal program operating in seven Kentucky spouse abuse shelters. Through these various roles I became well acquainted with these shelters, their staff, and their problems.

In the spirit of ethnographic inquiry, I gathered a lot of raw, unstructured information about rural woman battering that was inextricably tied up with tales of rural life in general. Putting my findings together and interpreting their numerous possible meanings involved considerable subjective analysis. By piecing together my ethnographic data and combining it with other documentary sources, I hope to contribute to our understanding of rural women's lives and their victimization by their intimate partners. More than anything, my approach is designed to present rural woman battering through the eyes and words of the women who have experienced it. In this sense I am following the theoretical line taken by Dorothy Smith and other realist feminist researchers, who acknowledge the authenticity of women's everyday experiences.⁵

Due to the dangerous and highly privatized nature of violence against women, ethnographic research opportunities involving participant observation are limited. Researchers cannot easily reside in homes where battering takes place and, if they did, their presence would seriously affect behavior therein. An alternative strategy in developing a textured understanding of abuse is to have women or men who have been in battering relationships systematically reflect on past events. In a sense, my interviews were a way of doing this.

Most battered women do not enter spouse abuse shelters. In Kentucky, as in other states, many more women are served by shelters

through outreach programs rather than through staying in shelters. At another level still, many abused women, for a variety of reasons, do not even have contact with shelters. The experiences I explore are therefore snapshots of a much larger social problem. It is not my argument that the experiences I report are somehow “representative” of all battering that goes on in rural communities.⁶

When two people undertake a personal interview, they may have many things in common. They may work at the same job, live in the same region, occupy the same social-class position, believe in the same religion, or be members of the same sex, race, or age group. Differing levels of shared experience produce varying degrees of congruence between the interviewer and the interviewee. The gendered experiential incongruence between myself and the women I talked with was perhaps compounded because interviewees were victims of male violence, not just “any” violence. Their experience of male violence, and my maleness, may have intensified the experiential incongruence between us. At times I wondered if I, as man, would be perceived as what Christine Delphy (1977) once called “the main enemy.”⁷ I shared these concerns with administrators of the KDVA and individual shelter directors and staff. Most told me that many battered women wanted to tell their stories to someone who would listen, regardless of whether the interviewer was male or female. This desire to tell their stories was, in some cases, heightened by the fact that as victims of violence, my interviewees had often been ignored by their abusers and criminal justice personnel, and their opinions and stories trivialized, met with disbelief or disdain, or, possibly, met with more violence. Indeed, several women told me they were glad that I was an “outsider” in the community. My outsider status meant that I was not part of the deeply entrenched gossip circuitry and was safer to trust with personal details.

There are other reasons for interviewers not to shy away from interviewing people with different social backgrounds. Human subjects stand at the juncture of a multitude of intersecting social forces and possess what Donna Haraway (1991) has called “fractured identities” (p. 155). Robert Merton (1972), using the different language of status sets, notes that “individuals have not a single status but a status set: a complement of variously interrelated statuses which interact to affect both their behavior and perspectives” (p. 22).

Merton notes that Insider and Outsider groups emerge at particular sociohistorical junctures characterized by the stress of acute social change. During these periods of acute social change, numerous tensions emerge