

**Amy Propen and Mary Schuster, *Rhetoric and Communication Perspectives on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault: Policy and Protocol Through Discourse*. New York and Milton Park: Routledge, 2017 216 pp. ISBN 9781138714984.**

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Females in the United States, Canada and Australia are much more likely to be violently assaulted, raped or sexually assaulted by a current or former partner, a family member or an acquaintance than a stranger (ABS 2012; CDC, 2011; 2012; Sinha 2013). And yet this statistical reality is rarely reflected in skewed media and political reactions to stranger homicides, stalking incidents and sexual assaults vis-à-vis domestic violence. In *Rhetoric and Communication Perspectives on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault*, Amy Propen and Mary Schuster apply theoretical perspectives from rhetorical analysis, law, feminism, cultural analysis and professional communication to illuminate public discourses and evaluate policy reform in relation to violence against women.

The book presents scholars with a diverse theoretical framework to examine responses to domestic violence and sexual assault. Their methodology brings together the authors' own empirical research; legal perspectives; rhetorical analysis of persuasive strategies (Segal, 2005); genre theory (Miller, 1984; see also Schuster and Propen, 2010); the concepts of *kairos* and kairotic cycles (Crowley and Hawhee, 2008: 48; Benedikt, 2002); moral panic theory (Cohen, 1980; Jenkins, 2004; Garland, 2008); risk perception (Beck, 2002); feminist scholarship on rape myths and gender roles (Lonsway and Fitzgerald, 1994; Daigle and Mummert, 2014); cultural perspectives (West-Newman, 2005); and inquiries into Othering (Ahmed, 2013; Joy Johnson et al, 2004).

Proppen and Schuster launch their inquiry via two cases studies. The first involves offender Steven Van Keuren who, on 22 September 2006, broke into his former girlfriend, Terri Lee's home in West Lake Township, Minnesota where Lee lived with her four children. After entering Lee's home with a .22-caliber gun, Van Keuren shot Lee six times and her boyfriend Timothy Hawkinson three times, killing them both. On 27 July 2007, Van Keuren was convicted of two counts of first-degree premeditated murder and sentenced to two consecutive terms of life imprisonment in state prison with no possibility of release. The second case study concerns sex offender Ming Sen Shiue. Shiue kidnapped his former high school teacher, Mary Stauffer and her 8-year-old daughter Beth in Roseville, Minnesota, locked them in his closet and repeatedly raped Mary over several weeks. He also killed 6-year-old Jason Wilkman, after Wilkman had spotted the Stauffers in the trunk of Shiue's car. If Shiue were ever to be granted parole, he is to be indefinitely civilly committed to the Minnesota Sex Offenders Program (MSOP). The MSOP involves treatment of 'patients' in a high-security facility until they may be safely released into the community.

Proppen and Schuster analyse how the introduction of two genres related to the Shiue and Van Keuren cases—the Lethality Assessment Protocol (LAP), created by the Maryland Network Against Domestic Violence 'to identify domestic violence victims at high risk of being killed by their abusers and to convince these victims to take advantage of advocacy services immediately' (p. 4) and the MSOP—can affect women's sense of agency. In addition, the authors explore how discursive acts and textual artifacts (Hirsch and Olson, 1995: 194) relating to the LAP and MSOP, including media articles, interviews, political statements, and legal cases involving domestic violence and sexual assault, shape and reflect shifting views on domestic violence and sexual assault.

After outlining the theoretical approach of the book, Chapter 1 identifies 'kairotic moments' (p. 31) in which horrific, albeit isolated, cases of sexual assault and homicide, and

public and political responses to them, generate waves of moral panic and an inflated perception of the risks of recidivism. In such moments, Proppen and Schuster argue, public safety concerns override and silence the constitutional rights of sex offenders; the low incidence of extreme violence perpetrated by strangers; and the relatively low reoffending rates of sex offenders. The authors reason that the fear generated by media coverage of sex offenders puts pressure on policymakers to commit further funds to initiatives such as the MSOP, often at the expense of domestic violence programs. This is despite the reality that politicians can never truly protect the public from every violent sexual offence. Proppen and Schuster find that such kairotic moments can lead to 'kairotic cycles in which the solutions to a problem can be stymied by competing perceptions and entrenched positions that reoccur over time, often without resolution' (p. 56).

Chapter 2 concentrates on Minnesota's LAP as a new and potentially disruptive genre, characterized less by kairotic cycles of inaction, exemplifying, instead, progress in intervening in and preventing further domestic violence. The LAP is a questionnaire administered by 'first responders' to domestic violence incidents. Its questions are geared towards identifying victims at risk of lethal domestic violence and persuading them to take immediate steps to leave the offender. Proppen and Schuster argue that this new genre—a risk assessment tool that persuades through rhetorical action—disrupts 'systemic behaviours within an organizational culture' in a way that changes, and even 'enlightens' or 'advances' that culture (p. 62).

Chapter 3 identifies outcomes of discourses which Other and essentialize the sex offender as a dangerous and monstrous rapist. Othering distorts understandings of recidivism by presenting a pessimistic view of rehabilitative treatment. It distracts from intervention, education and prevention and prohibits the creation of policies which recognize differences amongst sex offenders. Proppen and Schuster further contend that through Othering, policymakers may inadvertently relinquish power to the Othered group, thereby diminishing

their own power to deliberate openly about how to address sex offenders: ‘to be feared within society is to hold the power to illicit a strong emotional and rhetorical public response that stymies or blocks productive policymaking’ (p. 120).

In Chapter 4, Proven and Schuster review entrenched attitudes towards gender and violence and explore how domestic violence victims are Othered, essentialized and marginalized through the LAP and through metaphorical language. Domestic violence victims are distinguished from ‘us’ through language that attributes non-human qualities to ‘them’; they are marked as ‘deviant, irrational, uninformed, fragile, uncooperative, indecisive, unworthy, inhuman and even dangerous’ (p. 134).

In their concluding chapter, Proven and Schuster evaluate the LAP as a catalyst for change in criminal justice systems. They advocate a public health approach to curtailing domestic violence against women: ‘a systematic application of scientific learning aimed at understanding and addressing root causes’ (Janus, 2006: 116). In this approach, domestic violence is viewed as ‘not only an individual health issue but also a public health challenge’ (p. 170). Using Ratcliffe’s (2005) concept of ‘rhetorical listening’, the authors call for a constructive discussion around the civil commitment of sex offenders including a ‘greater openness when thinking critically about social groupings, texts, and cultures’ (p 103).

The collection of analytical and theoretical ideas that Proven and Schuster draw on to explore the LAP and the MSOP—most notably genre theory, studies of Othering, moral panic and *Kairos*—could be usefully extended to legal and policy areas in which politicians have proposed or instituted reactive, rushed and punitive laws at the expense of civil liberties, human rights and constitutional rights. This may include legal and political topics as diverse as parole, bail, mandatory sentencing, terrorism, refugee and immigration law, preventative detention and crime prevention orders (see e.g. Ashworth and Zedner, 2014; Garland, 2001; Lynch et al 2010; Methven and Carter 2016). The book offers a rich interdisciplinary theoretical framework for

scholars to apply not only to domestic and sexual violence, but also to other social and legal challenges.

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