



SEX, LOVE, AND ABUSE

Discourses on Domestic Violence
and Sexual Assault

Sharon Hayes



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Foreword

Sex, Love and Abuse is a provocative book. While some may be shocked to read about fantasies of the zipless fuck, discussions about recreational sex and the candid frankness of the author, many who read its pages will be drawn into a skilfully crafted narrative interwoven with insightful reflection and analysis.

The book explains why men are wistful for masculinity and women wistful for romance, why the nexus between sex, love and abuse is such a powerful and enduring one. It also explores the heterosexualizing of girls' bodies and how those who do not fit the ideal are pathologized, unrequited, loathed or vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. According to the author, Sharon Hayes, most of us are inflicted by "brain spaghetti" when it comes to thinking our way through sex, love and romance. Why wouldn't we be, given the saturation of Disney Princesses consumed by most females during childhood. So much of contemporary and not so contemporary cinema and fairy tales reinforce this nexus, by promoting the myth that romantic love is always tragic, painful if not brutal or abusive. The link between romance, sacrifice and tragedy is epitomized by the heroine of *Twilight* – who literally has to be engulfed by her bloodsucking vampire lover to be saved from a pack of encroaching werewolves. The proliferation of pornography linking desire, subjugation and violence is another troubling aspect of the nexus between, sex, love and abuse.

The entrapment of romance and the power effects of love are themes interwoven into the analysis. Love is transformative and all-consuming. So much so, that sometimes it can transform into a dominating possessiveness where women especially may feel trapped and unable to leave abusive relationships. Many do not understand why. Sharon Hayes does. These are women caught in a dark romance because if they leave, they think they will lose their identity and status in the social world. They are blinded by the ideology of romance and think they will become nothing in a heteronormative world where women are measured and defined by their male partner.

The book also explains why so much of the discourse that we consume and take for granted is heteronormative – based on the assumption that excludes same-sex romance, sex and love. But even here Sharon Hayes points out that among othered sexualities, the nexus between sex, love and abuse can sometimes reign. The chapter on female sexual predators will no doubt shock many, as most assume that women are victims of sex offenders and not sexual predators. While this book challenges the essentialisms of feminism, it makes a significant contribution to the reconfiguration of feminist analysis that does not succumb to faith in false universalisms, that somehow all women are non-violent and all men violent, that all queer relationships are harmonious and non-queer abusive. Nothing is this simple. The book struggles against the ideologies of feminist backlash that have become so popular in the twenty-first century.

I found the argument and tone of this book tantalizing. It was such a compelling read it was hard to put down, regardless of how much I squirmed at times about the sentiments and arguments proffered. I eventually found relief in the last page of the book – that's it not a book about women and men whose relationships stand outside the parameters of those modelled on sex, love and abuse. I commend it to a wide range of readers, students and scholars across the social sciences, and hope you enjoy reading *Sex, Love and Abuse* as much as I did.

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1

Introduction

Love and sex are moral issues. Together, they probably contribute more drama and more joy to our lives than any other human pursuit. Love and sex feed into and underpin many of our relationships, though sometimes quite disparately. They may be mutually exclusive: the love of a parent for a child is commonly nurturing and sexless; sexual encounters or relationships may be loveless. And yet love and sex are mutually reinforcing. Adult intimate relationships in Western society often are underpinned by love, and yet, like sexual relationships based purely on physical desire, romantic love relationships may be sustained chastely. One only need view a few films or television programmes depicting human relationships to perceive the vast variety of ideologies surrounding the two concepts, and how precarious is our human understanding of how love and sex work – so much so, that we often feel we “get it wrong”, that we can’t understand how we keep making bad choices. Both traditional and contemporary discourses around love and sex tend to be contradictory or dissonant, at least some of the time, leading to distortions that may or may not be recognized as such. This book is an exploration of the morality of love and sex, and how distortions of these sometimes develop into abuse. I argue that there are strong similarities between different kinds of abusive relationships, and that these similarities arise out of the common narratives surrounding romantic love and the logic of intimate relationships.

Background

Recently, I was having dinner with some colleagues, one of whom had just read a chapter from a previous book I had published, and

I asked her what she thought. After the usual compliments, she cornered me with a question. Much of my work comes from philosophy, particularly moral philosophy – the study of morality and ethics – mingled with post-structuralist thinking, which aims, crudely, to deconstruct social and political phenomena as a way of challenging current norms and accepted wisdom. She remarked that, while the chapter was interesting and engaging, what exactly could it contribute to criminology? She then asked, more particularly, “What can you, as a philosopher, offer me as a criminologist?” I was gobsmacked by this question as, like most philosophers, I took the value of my work to be self-evident. It was at this point I experienced an epiphany of sorts. So some criminologists don’t get me? That explains a lot!

At the time I think I mumbled some lame response, which was properly ignored (or should I say, smilingly tolerated and then silently dismissed) by my colleague, but the exchange proved to be one of the most important conversations of my career. Indeed, it was the start of a journey of sustained interrogation into my research, motivation and purpose that has culminated in the delivery of this book.

My thinking began quite fruitfully in the examination of just what is social science in general, and criminology in particular. Having worked in a multidisciplinary tertiary environment for many years, I had a fairly sophisticated understanding of the overall sociological imagination and the criminological project. My understanding was underpinned by formal and informal training in social science research methods and the conduct of qualitative projects in the field, and prior to my epiphany I had envisaged my contribution to be grounded in the philosophical analysis of what I saw as otherwise quite sterile research findings. Interviews with research participants were analysed through the lens of ancient and modern wisdom, social phenomena made sense of through the deconstruction of social discourses observed in the research process. I saw what I had to offer as a unique insight into social phenomena gained through the study of more than two millennia of philosophical wisdom and inquiry. Philosophy questions, it always questions, and this is the contribution I aimed to make. Philosophical inquiry also has political potential. As Stuart Hall famously notes, the study of society provides a starting point for observing and appreciating culture,

while a philosophical perspective “gives intellectual expression to the possibility of something better” (Hall, cited in Williams 2012).

My first epiphany was confirmed fairly swiftly in another academic context – that of a French philosophers’ reading group. As a multi-disciplinary but collegial school, we had decided to form a series of reading groups aimed at introducing our various “disciplines” and backgrounds to each other. The first text read by this group was Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, a seminal work in penology, as well as an all-round good read. As a pre-eminent philosopher, Foucault has been widely read, cited and criticized over the past several decades, and while I do not place myself on level with such greatness (“Saint Foucault!”), I dared to hope that at least some of my work might address such issues as punishment and crime in a similarly thoughtful and provocative manner. So I was again taken aback when one of my colleagues suggested that, rather than profound philosophical insight, what Foucault offered us was really just observation, plain and simple. I walked away with much to think about.

This book examines the nexus between sex, love and abuse. In doing so, it also attempts to answer the question of what philosophy can offer to criminology. Tentatively and provocatively, my conclusion has been that it is not what value philosophy can add to criminology, but rather, what good criminology can be without attaching itself to some decent and hardworking philosophizing. This book aims to turn the tables, so to speak, by interrogating the criminological project from a philosopher’s perspective. I do not claim to speak for philosophers as a group, by any means. There are many strands of philosophy, some of which completely contradict or refuse to speak to one another. The overarching aim of philosophy in general is clearer, however. Socrates argued that the unexamined life is not worth living. He initiated long discussions about the nature of human existence, including love, beauty and justice, among other ideals. Foucault was more interested in examining the social constructions of civil society and how these governed individual and social identities. Both philosophers challenge us to explore the common and the obvious with a view to uncovering the uncommon and exceptional. Observation certainly plays a part in this project, but observation is really only the very crude basis upon which inquiry can begin. It is inquiry that is the true purpose of philosophy, but

not as an end in itself. Rather, inquiry is the instrument for uncovering the uncommon and exceptional, for exposing the nuances and complexities of humankind and the world in which we live. In this sense, it almost always has political potential because it uncovers similarities and differences pertaining to how we live together in society and the world.

"But what does it *do*?" my learned colleague pressed. "Why not just use the research that's already been done to explain, or do more research to uncover what hasn't yet been uncovered?" By research, of course, she meant empirical research. The question then, is: what good does inquiry do when we are trying to understand and do something about crime and criminality? To begin my answer, I turn first to a quote, not from a traditional philosopher, but from a respected writer of literature. Literature and philosophy overlap in many ways. One of those ways is through the use of poetic language to convey new and deeper meaning regarding some phenomenon. Another is through contemplation and reflection on observation.

In *Couples* (1968: Chapter 2), John Updike offers us the following insight into why someone might be blind to adultery:

It is not difficult to deceive the first time, for the deceived possesses no antibodies; unvaccinated by suspicion, she overlooks lateness, accepts absurd excuses, permits the flimsiest patchings to repair great rents in the quotidian.

He could just as readily have said, "It's easy to deceive the inexperienced." Or even "Live and learn." But these seem sterile and crude in comparison. Updike uses literary language to paint a picture of deceit that brings home to us just how deeply flawed is the judgment of the vulnerable person. The deceived does not merely make excuses for her lover, she "permits the flimsiest patchings". She does not just overlook obvious lies, but "great rents in the quotidian". He provides us with images of a torn sheet or sail, an ordinary, everyday object (meant to serve us or comfort us) with great rips and tears through it. *That* is what deceit feels like to the uninitiated. The fabric of the relationship has been deliberately torn to pieces and yet she patches them up again and again in her naiveté, believing them to be caused by the wind and rain. The fact that she is "unvaccinated by deceit" delivers us imagery that depicts deceit as a disease to which

we are vulnerable if we lack the requisite antibodies. This imagery lends us the perspective of the vulnerable, allows us to empathize with her. Turning a blind eye to adultery isn't so ridiculous when seen through her eyes. We feel compassion and understanding; indeed, we feel her pain.

It is because we are moved that we understand and gain insight into her naiveté. Updike has put us in her shoes. In our minds we become part of the tragedy and in this way acknowledge the complexity of life. Marcel Proust observed that "much literature and drama would conceivably have proved entirely unengaging, would have said nothing to us, had we first encountered its subject matter over breakfast in the form of a news-in-brief" (cited in de Botton 1998: 38). This observation cleverly unmasks the need for literary insight to broaden our understanding. Imagine opening the newspaper over a cup of tea and reading the small side headline "Woman shoots husband after years of violence. Details page 4." How unremarkable such headlines seem these days. We shake our head in disbelief; "Why didn't she just leave him?" we ask. Turning to page 4, we find a small square of words explaining the "details":

A woman from Capalaba has been found guilty of grievous bodily harm after shooting her husband of nine years around 9pm last night. Neighbours called police, who arrested the mother of two while paramedics attended the injured man, who was taken to Royal Brisbane Hospital for treatment. The woman, who pleaded guilty, said she was reacting to years of beatings by the husband. Justice Paragon handed down a suspended sentence.

None of this information tells us why she stayed in an abusive relationship, what the actual relationship was like for the woman and their children. How does someone become involved in such a relationship? What kind of society manages to perpetuate abuse in relationships? What purpose, if any, does abuse serve? *Why* didn't she just leave? These are questions left untouched by news stories – and for the most part, also by criminological research. Empirical research tells us that around one-third of relationships are abusive, that the vast majority of victims are women and perpetrators men (Renzetti 1992; Ristock 2002; Ball and Hayes 2011). Surveys of, and interviews with, women conducted in empirical research reveal the spectrum of

abuses perpetrated on women, ranging from violent and physical, to emotional and financial. Theoretical research has taught us about the cycle of violence and psychological research about the perpetrators' need for control, their typically dysfunctional childhood relationships and victims' tendencies to co-dependency (Walker 1979). But none of this touches us or lends us insight so much as Stephen King's novel *Rose Madder*, or George Cukor's 1944 film, *Gaslight*. In *Gaslight*, Ingrid Bergman brilliantly portrays just how an intelligent and educated woman can easily succumb to the kinds of emotionally abusive tactics required to make her doubt her sanity. In *Rose Madder*, the heroine initially manages to escape many years of physical abuse, but her husband's relentless pursuit of her vividly exposes the intense fear and danger she had endured in the relationship, the hopeless resignation to daily pain and psychological torture. Even when women share their stories of abuse, either in the popular media, as memoirs, or in qualitative research studies, we may feel empathic to a degree, but we still find it difficult to understand the deeper meanings and personal impacts of the abusive relationship that kept the woman from leaving.

This book seeks to fill this gap by exploring the social and cultural milieu that allows abuse to flourish. It gratefully acknowledges the work of feminists, psychologists and criminologists in expanding our understanding of intimate partner abuse, but takes this understanding one step further by examining the governance of individuals and relationships through public discourses of love and sex. It addresses the questions of why there is "good" and "bad" love, "good" and "bad" sex, and why intimate relationships can be harmful. The book begins by exploring the contradictions inherent in Western attitudes towards love, sex and harm, and the tensions underlying the heteronormative imperative. It identifies constructions of romantic love and the erotic and how these are tied to harm and morality in intimate relationships. It unpacks and challenges the discourses surrounding current understandings of love, sex and abuse, and proceeds to explore some examples of harmful intimate relationships, specifically around intimate relationships between adults, and sexual relationships between generations.

To date, little scholarly research has been done from this perspective. While there are many feminist, criminological and psychological works on both intimate partner abuse and child sexual abuse,

there is very little outside these dominant theoretical perspectives. Most of those that do challenge this normative framework do so from within an Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) perspective, and are therefore fairly specifically focused on those groups. This book seeks to confront and interrogate the dominant paradigms and ask new questions such as whether it is possible for an individual to legitimately choose to stay in an abusive relationship without being pathologized, whether a woman can cause harm without being masculinized, why women who harm young children are not necessarily aberrations, and whether it is conceivable that a legally underage adolescent might consent to intimacy with an older partner – and what that means for dominant theories about harm, as well as current legislation surrounding it.

This book does not seek to construct a new theory about love, harm and intimacy. Rather, it seeks to destabilize essentialist understandings of these phenomena with a view to identifying the subtle and complex nature of relationships, such that they often defy easy explanation and categorization. It draws upon my previous theoretical work (Hayes and Carpenter 2012; Hayes et al. 2012; Hayes and Carpenter 2013), which also explores the morality of sex, but more specifically in relation to crimes such as prostitution, pornography, incest and sex trafficking. In the current book, I extend the moral and theoretical understandings of that work by focusing on theories, public discourses and moral ideals connecting romantic love, intimacy and harm. It is hoped this philosophical analysis lends a richer and more resonant impression of abuse in relationships and how such abuse is fostered.

Methodological considerations

In the service of these goals, I employ a range of explanatory and illustrative tools including auto-ethnography, hypothetical vignettes, case studies and discourse analysis. The use of hypotheticals in philosophy has a long tradition but it has also been used in social science, and even in survey design in criminology. In the latter context, vignettes provide a powerful quasi-experimental design which allows researchers to compare responses across randomly assigned characteristics, embedded in scenarios that remain constant across participants (Rossie and Nock 1982). In particular, this type of design

has been previously used in criminological studies of public attitudes towards sentencing as well as perceptions of hate crimes (e.g. Rossie and Nock 1982; Lyons 2008). Since this book is not based on survey research, I use vignettes in the philosophical tradition, to create hypothetical scenarios or stories that reflect the particular ideas and discourses being discussed. These vignettes draw on real life stories, in order to more accurately reflect current understandings of the issues based on lived experiences, but remain essentially hypothetical for obvious ethical reasons – except where such stories are reported in public arenas such as published books and memoirs. It is hoped that the reader will thereby be able to imagine more profoundly the nature of abuse from the inside.

I also use auto-ethnography as an analytical tool to illustrate my arguments. Auto-ethnography explores the author's personal experiences and connects them to broader social, cultural and political discourses. It focuses on one's subjective experience and is therefore self-reflective and reflexive in its approach. It is evocative in that it does not seek to develop theoretical understandings of social and cultural phenomena; rather, it focuses "on narrative presentations that open up conversations and evoke emotional responses" (Ellingson and Ellis 2008: 445). The use of personal narrative in this book will provide space for developing conversations around romantic love, sex and sexuality, which help to explore it from within, rather than from an observer's perspective. Auto-ethnography is most often used in performance studies (e.g. Denzin 1997), cultural studies and education (e.g. Sambrook et al. 2008). Although it is not considered "mainstream", examples abound in scholarly journals (e.g. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*) and books (e.g. Morrish and Sauntson 2007). It is narrative inquiry rather than autobiography because it draws on ahistorical moments and experiences as examples for analysis of the relevant discourses.

Discourse analysis is undertaken in the tradition of Foucault; that is, by examining the social, political, literary and scholarly dialogues surrounding love, sex and abuse, in order to identify power dynamics, strategies of governance and moments of resistance of the players involved. It is not a "critical discourse analysis" of the kind employed by scholars of linguistics or social science. It does not seek to enumerate the prevalence of particular phrases and ideas. Rather, it seeks to draw upon examples of the cultural context to expand our understanding of the issues and to challenge accepted wisdom.