

*Book Review: Dangerous Exits:
Escaping Abusive Relationships in Rural America*

by [WALTER S. DEKESEREDY](#) and [MARTIN D. SCHWARTZ](#)

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Dangerous Exits: Escaping Abusive Relationships in Rural America, Walter S. DeKeseredy and Martin D. Schwartz. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009. 165 p. \$22.95.

“Let us be careful not to idealize the community,” anthropologist Mary Douglas has cautioned. “It does not always deal kindly with its members.” Douglas’ insight goes to the heart of *Dangerous Exits*, a new qualitative study examining the physical, psychological, and sexual violence experienced by rural women in the process of leaving their intimate partners.

Conventional wisdom holds that rural communities are less affected by violent crime than densely populated urban areas. But authors Walter DeKeseredy and Martin Schwartz argue that, while a rural woman may be less likely to get mugged by a stranger on her way to the store, the social structure of the community in which she lives may actually make her more vulnerable to violence at the hands of a husband or boyfriend. Drawing on interviews with 43 women from rural Ohio, as well as their own previous research on rural criminology, DeKeseredy and Schwartz argue that cultural attitudes about privacy and a “good ol’ boy” network that extends into local law enforcement contribute to the incidence of separation and divorce sexual assault in rural America. Statistics—they acknowledge—are hard to come by, but their preliminary research working with a small sample of rural women prompts them to characterize separation and divorce sexual assault as “a major social problem” (66).

DeKeseredy and Schwartz position themselves within the intellectual tradition of critical criminology, which they describe as “a broad perspective that views the major sources of crime as the class, ethnic, and patriarchal relations that control our society” (29). Instead of analyzing criminal behavior solely in terms of individual pathology, critical criminologists seek to understand the cultural underpinnings of criminality and the ways in which it articulates with structures of power and privilege. Hence, DeKeseredy and Schwartz argue the problem of separation and divorce sexual assault is “not one in which individual men all happen to suffer from the same psychopathology, or weak ego, or whatever” (33). Rather, the authors suggest, abusive men see the unexpected termination of an intimate relationship as a threat to their masculinity and patriarchal control. Egged on by a culture of male peer support, these men turn to sexual assault and other forms of violence as a way of reasserting their dominance.

The most harrowing passages of *Dangerous Exits* are those in which the voices of the women that DeKeseredy and Schwartz interviewed can be clearly heard. One woman describes her frustration with neighbors who witness abuse, but refuse to get involved:

“There was too many of them that stood out of their homes and it was really aggravating, really aggravating when, I mean, it took my son to beg for my life. But here is our neighbors out here, seeing this man beat this female off the swing set, beating her with his fist, kicking her with his feet, grabbing her by the hair of her head, smearing her face and what, you’re gonna stand up there and aren’t gonna call the law? Or you are gonna stand up there and you aren’t gonna come down? Yeah, we lived in the country. It was probably about, if you walked it, fifteen or twenty minutes up the hill before you got to their house. But they could clearly see us. And they was outside standing and he was just thumping me so hard, so hard. And nobody called the law. Nobody did. Nobody came down to yank him off me. Nobody did anything. But I had the pictures. I had the pictures of the bruises. The pictures of where he caught the house on fire. I had the pictures where he had the marks around my neck trying to kill me.” (11)

Another woman is asked what she thinks that her experiences in an abusive relationship have taught her. Her answer is terrifyingly precise:

“I think it has taught me how to not ever let a man do something like this to you again. And that is why I have butcher knives I sleep with. Stabbing is easy. And if someone comes into my bed again, I will kill them. I guarantee you they will be stabbed. I won’t go to kill. You don’t have to kill somebody. I don’t have to cut his dick off. I don’t have to do that stuff. I can cut his hand off.” (83)

The women who participated in the study, often at significant risk to themselves, are undeniably experts on their own experience of intimate partner abuse. However, they are not necessarily experts on the factors that drive men to become abusive, and this is one very real limitation of DeKeseredy and Schwartz’s research design. Without gathering data from male perpetrators of abuse as well as female victims, DeKeseredy and Schwartz are forced to rely on indirect attributions of intentionality. For instance, they state that “seventy-nine percent of the women in our study said that their partners strongly believed that men should be in charge and control of domestic household settings.” While women’s perceptions of male patriarchal attitudes are themselves significant, they are no substitute for men’s accounts of their own attitudes—especially when DeKeseredy and Schwartz are trying to tease out the internal dynamics of a male peer culture that enables abuse.

Perhaps the weakest section of *Dangerous Exits* is the final chapter’s grab bag of policy proposals. DeKeseredy and Schwartz’s commitment to collaborative feminist research prompted them to ask interviewees for their suggestions about how to reduce the incidence of sexual assault and divorce in rural areas. Some of the ensuing suggestions are promising, like increasing the number of female police officers in an effort to weaken the “good ol’ boy” network. Others are admirable, but vague. DeKeseredy and Schwartz then weigh in with a slate of their own policy proposals, which range from the reasonable (subsidies for job training) to the quixotic (pro-feminist graffiti on abandoned barns). Many of their proposals feel curiously out of touch, misaligned with the actual structure of civil society in rural America. For instance, they suggest inviting pro-feminist men’s organizations like the National Organization of Men Against Sexism to hold town hall meetings in community centers and other public settings. This reviewer

suspects that such a town hall meeting, if it were held in his community, would be sparsely attended, indeed.

DeKeseredy and Schwartz are right to insist that reducing the incidence of separation and divorce sexual assault in rural communities will take more than tougher sentencing laws. It will take a cultural shift, one that interrogates patriarchal privilege through existing institutions and locally relevant registers of meaning. For instance, a number of DeKeseredy and Schwartz's interviewees allude to verses in the Bible that enjoin wives to submit themselves to their husbands. Regrettably, DeKeseredy and Schwartz do not pursue these references any further. In fact, the word "religion" does not even appear as a term in the index of *Dangerous Exits*. Yet pastors in predominantly Christian rural communities could have a real impact if they chose to speak out about the problem of sexual violence and the importance of consent in a Biblical context. Of course, coaching rural pastors on feminist theology is well beyond the boundaries of public policy. But this is an area where activism within individual denominations or even the support of a nationally prominent figure like Rick Warren might prove more effective than the creation of another government program.

Despite its missteps (and despite the complete invisibility of lesbian, bisexual and transgender women in its pages), *Dangerous Exits* does develop a plausible model for the interaction of patriarchal control, sexual violence, and community complicity in rural areas. The book consistently takes its cues from the voices of real rural women, and its grounding in the principles of participatory feminist research is nothing short of exemplary. It will fall to future researchers to flesh out DeKeseredy and Schwartz's ideas about a culture of male peer support for abuse, and to develop a more robust set of policy proposals that are grounded in the realities of rural life.

About the Authors:

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(Author biographies taken from publisher's website: http://rutgerspress.rutgers.edu/acatalog/Dangerous_Exits.html)