Bad Girls for Better or Worse

A review of

Perceptions of Female Offenders: How Stereotypes and Social Norms Affect Criminal Justice Responses

by Brenda L. Russell (Ed.)


Reviewed by

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The term bad girls in the title of this review is not a sexist error. It is a deliberate evocative attempt to engage the reader experientially with an example of what Perceptions of Female Offenders: How Stereotypes and Social Norms Affect Criminal Justice Responses, edited by Brenda Russell, is about. That men and women are different is obvious and incontestable, not a mistake of nature or an arbitrary invention of culture.

The important questions focus not on whether but on how the sexes are different and how the differences matter. To what extent are beliefs about and enactments of gender differences a matter of choice and/or culture and zeitgeist? What can or should social and legal systems do when confronted with claims or evidence of differences? These are loaded questions for many reasons, including the fact that gender has historically been identified as a persistent focus for oppressive and constricting social and cognitive stereotypes, misconceptions, and biases.
Men who find their (stereotypically) innate competitive juices evaporating under the weight of feminist advances may find comfort in the knowledge that male dominance in at least one area remains secure—the dominance of men in the overall commission of crime. Men, for example, per recent U.S. Department of Justice (2011) statistics, appear to be vastly better at killing, as demonstrated by a 9-to-1 ratio of men to women as perpetrators of homicide.

Despite the relative statistical underrepresentation of women in many areas of criminal behavior, there are now hundreds of empirical studies demonstrating significant and in some instances increasing roles for women as criminal offenders, including as perpetrators of violent offenses in which women have prototypically been regarded as victims. Public fascination with female criminality also remains high, especially when the offense is of a type that violates social norms and stereotypes that expect women to be nurturing and nondangerous. For example, as of the date of this review (June 2013), Wikipedia has no page for male murderers or male serial killers but has 35 pages devoted to female murderers broken down by nationality, as well as a Category Talk page containing multiple entries and links to information about female serial killers.

To what extent do those who work with female offenders still labor under a burden of gender-related stereotype, misconception, prejudice, and bias? Is there agreement as to what is the empirical truth about women and crime? Is female criminality an aberration, or is it an everyday phenomenon that is widely discounted and underappreciated because it does not fit the stereotypic images of what we believe or wish women to be? Should aggressive behavior be interpreted and judged differently when carried out by a man versus a woman? Do traditional female family caretaking and parenting roles warrant the more lenient sentences that female offenders often receive, compared with those given to men convicted of similar crimes? These and similar questions guide editor Russell and 16 other authors through 11 chapters that investigate the role of stereotypes and social norms as factors that guide (or, perhaps more accurately, misguide) scholarship about, public perception of, and correctional and public health policy toward female offenders.

Following an introductory chapter by editor Russell, Javdani sets a tone for the volume by zeroing in on the issue of level of analysis, beginning with the observation that studies methodologically focused on individual characteristics, such as twin and adoption studies, fail to account for a substantial portion of the variance in antisocial behavior. Gender, Javdani argues, operates as a grouping construct at an ecological level of analysis, reverberating across multiple contexts that push or place men and women into a wide range of unequal roles, occupations, and other socially and psychologically significant categories.

Javdani explores ecological perspectives on female offending in the specific contexts of juvenile status offenses, drug-related offenses, and domestic-violence-related offenses. According to Javdani, viewing gender through an ecological lens should be important to decisions about how to deploy intervention resources: When should our policies focus on changing the offender, as a person, and when should we focus on changing the systemic
environmental contexts and social contingencies in which the person lives? In general, we
cannot change a person’s gender, but we can change how people are treated on account of
their gender.

Continuing Javdani’s strategy of parsing analysis into individual and ecological
factors, three chapters examine issues of female involvement in sexual offenses, including
sexual violence perpetration by female middle-schoolers; sexual aggression by female
college students; and effects of victim characteristics such as age, gender, and sexual
orientation on perceptions of sexual assaults committed by women.

Vandenberg, Brennan, and Chesney-Lind shift the focus from offenders to the issue of
whether media portrayals of female offenders are biased. Do newspapers, in a vicious cycle,
both express and contribute to creating stereotypic images and assumptions about women
accused or convicted of crimes? These authors created a measure to reliably classify the tone
of newspaper stories as positive, neutral, or negative with respect to whether an alleged
female offender was portrayed in terms that invited unfavorable judgment or that invited
understanding and sympathy.

Story tone was then evaluated against the alleged offenders’ race/ethnicity and against
objective perceptual salience factors of each story, such as overall amount of text devoted to
the story, whether the story was placed on the front page or elsewhere, whether it was above
or below the fold, whether it was aligned to left margin to coordinate with left-to-right
reading patterns, whether it was given a distinguishing font size or headline width, and
whether it included a photograph. Results demonstrated that stories about minority women
were more likely to be negatively toned—indeed, a female offender’s race/ethnicity
predicted story tone better than the type of crime or the objective perceptual salience of the
printing.

About half of the book is devoted to four chapters dealing with intimate partner
violence (IPV). Three chapters debate whether IPV is a gender-symmetric phenomenon or a
gender-specific one, and one chapter introduces an enormous comprehensive database of
IPV literature, the Partner Abuse State of Knowledge Project (PASK). IPV is the gender-
neutral term that has supplanted historical tendencies to identify this social problem with
gender-specific labels (e.g., battered women’s syndrome). White and Dutton rely on
empirical evidence of significant gender symmetry in IPV to conclude that “gender, as a unit
of analysis, provides little more analytical gravitas than a stereotype” (p. 102). Buttell and
Starr follow with a corollary argument that frames traditional gendered perspectives as
themselves stereotypes whose effect is to trivialize female aggression toward men and
relegate it “to the dustbin of legal and scholastic insignificance” (p. 120).

Ferraro slugs back, citing gender-specific issues of sexual coercion, reproductive
control, abuse during pregnancy, and strangulation. She defends the significance of the
battered women’s movement and the importance of gender and sexism in understanding IPV
and reminds us of our troubling cultural history of laws, policies, and public attitudes that
tolerated and at worst normalized husbands’ violence against wives. Ferraro ends with a
conclusion that any shift toward a gender-neutral intervention policy for IPV is premature because “scholars on both sides of the ‘gender symmetry’ debate rely on outdated data and assumptions about masculinity and femininity that are unsupported by current and reliable research” (p. 146).

What is arguably the most valuable chapter in the entire book is saved for next to last. This is Hamel and Russell’s introduction to the PASK project. The authors focus on the project’s implications for law enforcement responses to domestic violence—but the importance of the PASK extends far beyond that limited context. The PASK is a mammoth collaborative undertaking representing the work of 40 scholars from 20 universities in the United States, Canada, and Israel, who collectively and comprehensively reviewed the past 20 years of domestic violence research literature. The 17 resulting articles, each addressing a particular topic, amount to some 2,300 pages and were published in the journal *Partner Abuse* between April 2012 and January 2013. Although this fact is not reported in the chapter, at the time of this review, the PASK database was available online at the journal’s website without cost, an enormous gift to scholarship and to victims of IPV everywhere whose futures may be improved by open-access dissemination of this knowledge.

This book is a fine introduction to the literature and the controversies surrounding perception of female offenders. It is available both in print and as an e-book. At 11 chapters and 196 pages, the book is not meaty enough to be the only text for a semester-long course, but it should find a place in the syllabi of advanced undergraduate and graduate courses in gender studies, family studies, criminology, and forensics. The controversial and unsettled nature of many issues should render the book a good resource if learning activities include organizing student debates.

I have already decided to update the existing domestic violence scenario used by standardized patients who help me teach clinical interviewing skills. On the basis of the strength of the evidence for gender symmetry in IPV, I think it is time that such teaching scenarios should stop perpetuating gender stereotypes and include the options of male and same-sex victims. Researchers entering this area should also find the book to be a useful resource text, especially in combination with the PASK, and, for clinical professionals who deal with female offenders, it is an excellent continuing education experience that can bring them closer to the empirical foundations of their work.

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**Reference**
