

Book Review : Counseling Women: Kinship Against Violence in India¹

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Kowalski, Julia .2022. Counseling Women: Kinship Against Violence in India. University of Pennsylvania Press . pp. 208 pages. E-book ISBN 9781512822830. Price .Rs. 2835.74.

Julia Kowalski's "Counseling Women: Kinship against Violence in India" critically examines domestic violence in India. This challenges typical Western views on women's rights and independence. Through her fieldwork in Jaipur, Rajasthan, she examines how family counselors support women facing violence and domestic issues. Kowalski said that only an individual rights approach ignores the important role of family and kinship networks in shaping experiences of gendered violence and potential solutions. In societies where family ties are central to social interactions, agency often arises from these relationships rather than from the Western notion of independence. By exploring the counselors' methods that emphasize these connections, Kowalski shows that for many women, empowerment may not fit traditional ideas of autonomy. It presents a substantial alternative to traditional perspectives on women's rights and domestic violence in various cultural contexts.

Keywords: empowerment, domestic violence, women's rights, kinship.

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This work, meticulously researched with an empathetic understanding, ventures beyond the dominant ethnographic lens to illuminate the often ignored how family counselors in India utilize kinship networks to assist women in confronting and overcoming violence. The theme of the book revolves around the argument that the comprehensive perspective on the cultural challenges and opportunities related to domestic violence in the particular region. While the emphasis on kinship as a supportive resource is important, some critics argue that this focus might overlook the impact of patriarchal power dynamics in these networks, which contribute to domestic violence. A thorough critique should explore whether improving interdependence unintentionally reinforces harmful norms or pressures women to remain in unsafe relationships. It also notes that counselors often avoid labeling situations as "violence," opting instead to concentrate on improving relationships. Although this strategy can be beneficial in certain contexts, it may also obscure the seriousness of abuse and blur the distinction between marital discord and violence. After critical examination could raise concerns about the implications of this approach for acknowledging severe abuse and whether it undermines a woman's agency in defining her experiences. While the findings are rooted in research from a specific region in North India, the broader message regarding culturally sensitive practices may not be universally applicable, as the particular strategies related to kinship may not translate well to other cultural settings or regions. Additionally, while the review touches on evolving legal and familial structures, a more in-depth analysis could investigate the relationship between kinship-based interventions, legal systems, and external support mechanisms such as shelters and women's rights organizations. The interplay of various elements in supporting women and addressing domestic violence raises important questions, particularly regarding the limitations of kinship-focused approaches, especially in contexts where kinship may perpetuate severe abuse. "Counseling Women" makes a notable contribution to the discourse on domestic violence by advocating for a culturally sensitive framework and highlighting the role of interdependence in kinship-based societies. However, a thorough critique necessitates careful examination of its implications, particularly the risk of overshadowing structural inequalities or underestimating the gravity of violence. By considering these complexities, scholars and practitioners can enhance their understanding of how to ethically and effectively assist women facing domestic violence across diverse cultural contexts. It provides a compelling and insightful analysis of domestic violence and counseling methodologies in India, with a

chapter-wise review that facilitates a more profound exploration of the book's arguments and contributions.

The book is structured around five chapters. The opening chapter of the book sets the stage by contrasting the individual rights-based frameworks often employed by the state in addressing domestic violence with the relational methodologies favored by family counselors. These counselors, positioned as "neutral experts," handle the challenging pattern of behavior between familial expectations and legal obligations. While the chapter underscores their impartial role, it raises critical questions about the feasibility of true neutrality, especially in the presence of power imbalances within families that counselors may recognize either overtly or subtly in their practices. This focus on neutrality may overlook the systemic biases and constraints that can shape counselors' interventions, warranting a more nuanced critique of their role.

The next chapter explores the specific counseling strategies utilized by family counselors, highlighting their emphasis on communication, reconciliation, and fostering interdependence among family members. The author illustrates how counselors assist women and families in "adjusting and explaining" their circumstances to one another, aiming to resolve conflicts and enhance relationships rather than merely pursuing legal or punitive actions against the offenders. However, this focus on adjustment may inadvertently place an excessive burden on women to navigate challenging situations and assume responsibility for mending relationships that may be fundamentally compromised by abuse. Critics may question whether this approach sufficiently addresses the underlying causes of violence and whether prioritizing reconciliation is always aligned with the victim's best interests, particularly regarding their safety and autonomy.

The third chapter explores the relationship between counseling practices and existing domestic violence laws in India. This underscores the potential conflicts that arise when the legal framework, often shaped by an individualistic rights perspective, contrasts with counselors' focus on relational and family-oriented approaches. This chapter investigates the complexities that emerge when legal options are available but may not be prioritized in counseling settings, particularly in cases of severe violence. It raises critical questions about whether the counselors' culturally rooted methods effectively facilitate women's access to justice and legal protection, especially when family reconciliation is emphasized over legal remedies.

In the fourth chapter, the author The core ideas of *seva* (i.e. Care givers) and careful speech combine to create a solid foundation for personal growth and social harmony in counseling practice. This chapter illustrates how counselors, through their commitment to *seva*, assist clients in employing communication techniques that aim to reduce conflict, articulate needs, and foster understanding within familial relationships. While recognizing the benefits of these approaches, it is essential to critically evaluate whether focusing on careful speech might inadvertently obscure or diminish the seriousness of situations involving verbal abuse or psychological manipulation. This analysis prompts a necessary inquiry into whether "careful speech" genuinely empowers women or risks rationalizing or trivializing the effects of abusive behavior.

The fifth chapter highlights the central thesis of the book: counselors prioritize "ordering interdependence" rather than categorizing situations as "violence." By emphasizing the reconfiguration of relationships and the cultivation of healthy interdependence, counselors can present a culturally relevant and effective strategy for many women in India. However, this approach raises concerns about the potential normalization of violence and the challenges it may pose for women seeking to escape abusive circumstances in the future. This chapter invites readers to critically assess the cultural significance of "ordering interdependence" in light of its implications for recognizing the severity of abuse. It concludes by synthesizing the book's arguments and illustrating how counselors assist women in reshaping their futures within kinship by leveraging their familial and social networks.

This study employs a multifaceted approach, drawing on that this relational framework, while distinct from Western empowerment models, can genuinely enhance women's agency and well-being within their cultural contexts. Nonetheless, a critical examination is warranted to determine whether this approach is universally applicable or may inadvertently limit options for women in oppressive kinship structures, where separation may be the only path to safety. Additionally, the chapter could benefit from a deeper exploration of the long-term effectiveness of these interventions and the risk of reverting to violence if entrenched patriarchal dynamics within families remain unchallenged.

In the women's point of view, majority of the coping strategies were based on problem focused approaches where the central cause of stress was the abusive partner or relation. By resolving

various peripheral possible causes of conflict, the women used to deal with the stressor. A shift is being seen as the husband spends more time to reflect and retrospect with the woman, which leads to resolution of minute differences and decreases the risk of violence. When the husband spends even a little bit of time listening to the women's problems and matters of the home that they want to discuss with them, the women feel a sense of relation. This is supplemented by the gross reduction in alcohol consumption. Alcohol is a recurrent theme that largely contributes to violence due to the alterations in behavior that it causes. The results suggest that the government should take the initiative to ensure their safety and well-being. This may be achieved by means of awareness campaigns and of dissemination of coping and stress management techniques to combat boredom, activation of social networks, and emotional help and counseling through telecommunication. Economic independence can help women break free from abuse, women's employment was the most frequently reported factor that was associated with women's experiences in the quantitative literature. Since we could not establish cause and effect due to cross-sectional nature of the studies reviewed, it is possible that it may have caused some women to secure employment as a means of financial support. For employment to serve a protective role, there is need for awareness and modified cultural norms against rigid gender roles. We also noticed that partner's addiction (e.g., substance abuse), controlling behaviors and having more children in the family such as the effective enforcement of the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, economic empowerment for women, comprehensive community support systems, and widespread social awareness and education initiatives that are necessary to fundamentally challenge deeply embedded patriarchal norms that perpetuate abuse. By prioritizing the nuanced, localized success of kinship-based counseling, the book may not fully discuss the systemic changes required to tackle the problem on a societal scale.

In conclusion, in an era where caste and race-based discrimination continues to persist, this remain a global concern; this research focuses a culturally nuanced exploration of domestic violence counseling within the Indian context. A thorough scholarly critique of its chapters would require an in-depth analysis of the implications of its arguments, especially concerning the delicate balance between maintaining family unity and safeguarding the safety and autonomy of women facing abuse. Beyond the immediate context of repatriation, the book offers critical insights into this important work what role in the broader global conversation

surrounding domestic violence and women's rights. The authors highlight the enduring repercussions of such injustices on the gender based communities. This nuanced perspective not only enhances our understanding of women's rights. But also contributes to global discussions on equal rights of all human being and the quest for justice for the Female gender.