

1-1-2011

## Book Review: "Been a Heavy Life: Stories of Violent Men" (Lois Presser)

Laura King  
*University of Illinois Press*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.indianastate.edu/jtpcrim>



Part of the [Criminology and Criminal Justice Commons](#), and the [Social Control, Law, Crime, and Deviance Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

King, Laura (2011) "Book Review: "Been a Heavy Life: Stories of Violent Men" (Lois Presser)," *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Criminology*. Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholars.indianastate.edu/jtpcrim/vol3/iss1/8>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Publications at Sycamore Scholars. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Criminology by an authorized editor of Sycamore Scholars. For more information, please contact [dana.swinford@indstate.edu](mailto:dana.swinford@indstate.edu).

Presser, L. (2008). *Been a Heavy Life: Stories of Violent Men*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

In *Been a Heavy Life: Stories of Violent Men*, Lois Presser presents the findings of several in-depth, qualitative interviews she conducted with a sample of violent men from a variety of locations including prisons, halfway houses, and homeless shelters. Her analysis reveals the manner in which the identities and life stories of these men emerged in, as well as through, the interview process. That is, the interview itself was a social event that shaped and was shaped by the interaction between the researcher and the narrator. While researchers often attempt to control for these research effects, Presser embraced and closely examined the manner in which her presence affected the findings. Although a large portion of the book focuses on the life stories of these violent men, some of the most important contributions of this work are the methodological lessons and insights gleaned by Presser throughout her research.

In the first chapter of the book, Presser provides a thorough explanation of the main concepts that framed her research. Identities are conceptualized as dynamic and complex constructions that cannot be compartmentalized into categories (e.g., sex, race, class). In line with an intersectionality perspective, the meanings and interdependencies among these characteristics are paramount in understanding the complexity and adaptability of identity. Presser also conceptualizes the self as a dynamic and complex construction, one that cannot be identified without reference to others. In other words, the self can change and adapt in accordance with the social and physical environment. The narrative, which Presser contends is the only mechanism through which identities can be thoroughly examined, is viewed through a "post-positivist" lens in which it is interpreted as "constitutive" of reality, not representative. In other words, narratives are subjective stories that are influenced by social norms, cultural values, and language. The second chapter of the book goes on to discuss the social construction of identities and narratives and the processes through which

they are shaped. This chapter offers a comprehensive analysis of a variety of conceptual frameworks of identity construction including symbolic interactionism, labeling theory, and structured action theory. Presser concludes the chapter with a discussion of the manner in which identities and narratives influence offending behavior through mechanisms such as techniques of neutralization and theories of desistance.

Chapters Three and Four focus on research effects and the methodology employed for this study. In terms of research effects, Presser thoroughly discusses the co-production of data. That is, the identities and narratives that emerge during the interview process are inevitably influenced by both the narrator and the researcher. In this sense, the interview itself is entered into the narrative and the researcher becomes an essential component in its construction. Combined with the social appearances and roles of the researcher and narrator, Presser contends that all of these elements coalesce to create the social reality upon which the narrative is based. As far as the methods utilized for this study, a sample of 27 violent men was gathered. The majority of men had been convicted of a violent offense such as murder, robbery, or rape. The sample was primarily African American and ranged in age from 17 to 57. Qualitative interviews were conducted on one or more occasions in a variety of settings. The interviews were open-ended in nature beginning with questions as simple as, "How did you come to be here?" The narratives served as the units of analysis and were thematically analyzed until saturation.

In Chapters Five through Eight, Presser reports the major substantive findings of her research utilizing direct quotes from the interviews, as well as her own conclusions. These four chapters detail the types of narratives she encountered. The first of these was the reform narrative in which the narrator outlined his specific plan for desistance from violent behavior. In many cases, the narrator often separated himself from the protagonist of the story. That is, the narrator framed himself as the moral evaluator of his former self who was driven to violence by external forces such as alcohol, boredom, and poverty. As such, he has already started down the pathway toward reform by condemning the actions of his

former self. Chapter Six details stability narratives in which violent behavior is regarded as a temporary, out-of-character occurrence. In other words, these offenders have little need for reform. In several cases, the narrators claimed their violent behavior was necessary in order to maintain their honor and masculinity. Many of these narratives were characterized by an attempt to minimize the severity of the narrator's violent behavior. Elastic narratives, outlined in Chapter Seven, represented over one half of all narratives. These were characterized by both reform and stability themes. Again, violent behavior was neutralized to confirm the narrator's morality, but it was coupled with vague plans for reform. Whereas reform narratives detailed the desire to become a better person, elastic narratives eluded to the goal of simply avoiding the criminal justice system. In Chapter 8, Presser discusses narratives of heroic struggle, which is arguably one of the most important substantive findings. The image of the narrator as the heroic man in a persistent struggle against internal and external forces, which was present in most narratives, speaks directly to previous research that has examined the relationship between hegemonic masculinity and crime (e.g., Cullen, Golden, & Cullen, 1979; Messerschmidt 1993, 2000; Murner, Wright, & Kaluzny, 2002).

In Chapter Nine, Presser revisits the discussion of research effects, most notably social desirability and reactivity. For example, many of the men elicited her participation in downplaying the severity of their offense, while others sought her clinical opinion (which she refrained from offering). In addition, Presser discusses the effect of her being an educated, white, middle class female on the narratives. Through her analysis, Presser also deduced that simply being asked to participate and agreeing to participate in the interview had an effect on the narratives that emerged in that it confirmed the narrator's involvement in violent behavior. As such, the participants used the interview as an opportunity to establish their moral decency, voice plans for reformation, and detail their heroic struggles. The manner in which all of these elements affected the narrative that emerged offers support for Presser's contentions in Chapters One and Two that the self cannot be constructed without

reference to others and that identities are complex, dynamic, and shaped by environmental and social influences.

The final chapter of the book briefly returns to the discussion of masculinity and crime and concludes with Presser's suggestions for theory and policy. Presser calls for further research to examine the relationship between hegemonic masculinity and crime. Do these masculine ideals lead to harmful action? Are narratives of heroic action inherently criminogenic? Does masculinity, in the face of powerlessness and difference, know no other means of survival but violence and crime? These are all questions that have, and will continue to warrant additional research. In terms of theory, Presser calls for a reflexive criminology in which criminologists examine the role they have played in constructing definitions of crime and criminals. In other words, how has criminology inadvertently shaped the conceptualization and operationalization of crime and offenders through theory and research? In what ways have the variables included in and excluded from theory and research contributed to penal harm? Two of the main policy suggestions offered by Presser are the increased use of restorative justice techniques and the inclusion of narratives in cognitive behavioral treatment. Although restorative justice techniques have shown success in the areas of victim satisfaction and recidivism reduction (Latimer, Dowden, & Muise, 2005), their applicability to violent crimes, specifically violence against women (of which several participants were convicted), is debatable (Ptacek, 2010). Moreover, altering treatment techniques (e.g., cognitive behavioral therapy) that have repeatedly been shown to be effective (Lipsey, Landenberger, Wilson, 2007), based on a sample of 27 men, falls short of the current demand for evidence-based practices.

Overall, *Been a Heavy Life: Stories of Violent Men* offers a unique perspective for those interested in critical criminology, discourse analysis, identity construction, and qualitative research. The focus of the book is primarily on qualitative research methods and the manner in which identities are constructed through narratives. Throughout the book, Presser provides an impressive analysis of theory and practice related to these topics.

Although the title of the book suggests an in-depth analysis of violent behavior, those looking for detailed accounts of violent crime and its antecedents will be disappointed. As previously mentioned, Chapters Five through Eight focus on the types of stories told by these violent men. However, the themes of reform, stability, elasticity, and heroic struggle were not surprising, nor were the findings that many of these men reported a history of substance abuse, mental illness, and poverty. While these issues are certainly important, they do not necessarily offer new knowledge to the field. In addition, Presser does not specifically explain how the different types of narratives can aid in offender treatment and recidivism reduction. Should there be individualized treatment protocols dependent upon the type of narrative told? Since she contends that narratives and identities are constantly changing and adapting based on social and environmental influences, would treatment plans be required to change in accordance with narratives? From the point of view of a practitioner, would such a treatment protocol be practical and efficacious? Although this book has some shortcomings in terms of substantive findings and suggestions for policy related to violent offenders, it nevertheless would be a valuable tool for those interested in qualitative research methods, discourse analysis, and identity construction.

## REFERENCES

- Cullen, F. T., Golden, K. M., & Cullen, J. B. (1979). Sex and delinquency: A partial test of the masculinity hypothesis. *Criminology*, 17, 301-310.
- Latimer, J., Dowden, J., & Muise, D. (2005). The effectiveness of restorative justice practices: A meta-analysis. *Prison Journal*, 85, 127-144.
- Lipsey, M. W., Landenberger, N. A., & Wilson, S. J. (2007). Effects of cognitive-behavioral programs for criminal offenders. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 6. Retrieved December 30, 2010, from <http://www.campbellcollaboration.org/library.php>
- Messerschmidt, J. (1993). *Masculinities and crime: Critique and reconceptualization of theory*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Messerschmidt, J. (2000). *Nine lives: Adolescent masculinities, the body, and violence*.

Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Murnen, S. K., Wright, C., & Kaluzny, G. (2002). If "boys will be boys," then girls will be victims? A meta-analytic review of the research that relates masculine ideology to sexual aggression. *Sex Roles*, 46, 359-375.

Ptacek, J. (Ed.). (2010). *Restorative justice and violence against women*. New York: Oxford University Press, Inc.