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# Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

## **Transformation and Rehabilitation: Ethnographic Encounters with Sex Offenders**

**Review by Molly A. Sardella**

*Cruel Attachments: The Ritual Rehab of Child Molesters in Germany*

by John Borneman

University of Chicago Press, 2015

John Borneman's *Cruel Attachments: The Ritual Rehab of Child Molesters in Germany* is an ethnographic account of fieldwork among men who had been accused and convicted of child molestation. In much of the West, individuals who have been found guilty of sexual offenses against a child are viewed as irredeemable predators. They are placed upon a legal registry, often for the rest of their lives. They are ostracized from certain arenas of life including any public place where children may be present. At times, they are forbidden to interact with their own children. All of these actions serve to emphasize their status as dangerous criminals, incapable of ever fully rejoining the wider society.

In Germany, however, sex offenders, regardless of the severity of their crime, are typically provided with therapy. In fact, the approval of a therapist is often required before an offender can be released from a prison sentence. These therapeutic treatments represent a belief among Germans, grounded in a long history of social policy and practice, that people are capable of profound change if they engage in introspective practices. Reflecting upon one's actions privately, in cooperation with therapeutic professionals, and through interacting with various publics, can lead to radical transformations of one's very self. Furthermore, according to Borneman, the treatments are designed in order to enact social change through the process of reforming individuals.

Borneman's text is ambitious. Like many works that can be categorized as "psychological anthropology", *Cruel Attachments* attempts to paint a picture of the self, or selves, in the process of becoming. Through tracing the multi-step course of individual actors coming to be child molesters, Borneman wishes to show how a person's conception of self, or even multiple selves (p.53), and his lived experience (p.32) is continuously shaped through "interpersonal investments" (p.31). While the subjects of this text experience particular types of interpersonal investments, such as emotional transference, legal labeling, and clinical analysis, it is clear that Borneman views these kinds of relations as being generally significant. Building off of Habermas (1989) Borneman describes selves being developed, defined, and transformed, through negotiating with others within the public sphere.

Attempting to approach this topic from multiple angles, Borneman has written an ethnography that deviates from the norm stylistically. The text is divided up into three rather distinct sections: a detailed and lengthy prolegomenon, a more classical ethnographic study of child molesters undergoing therapeutic treatment in modern day Germany (Chapters 1-6), and a concluding chapter (7) entitled "Loose End" (p.191). Borneman describes this final piece of the text as "a series of odds and ends..." which should be viewed as "...openings to further research" (p.191). Both the prolegomenon and final chapter allow Borneman the freedom to link his ethnographic study to the broader topics of anthropological methods and ethics.

This unusual structure can be seen as either valuable or detrimental to the text depending upon the objectives and positionality of the audience. Someone hoping to follow Borneman's arguments about sex offenders in Germany specifically, particularly those with practical end goals related to public policy, may find it difficult to navigate between these vastly different sections. For instance, it is easy to get caught up in the narrative of the prolegomenon - which focuses on the complex relationships between one "offender" named Marquardt, his psychiatrist, Lemke, and Borneman himself - and lose sight of the more traditional research project. On the other hand, anyone with an interest in debating the processual nature of anthropological research, or the ethical implications of undertaking certain sensitive projects rather than others, would benefit from closely analyzing how Borneman weaves together his case studies and personal reflections on the role he himself played in the process of shaping "selves."

From a research standpoint the main substance of the text can be found in Chapters 1 – 6. Throughout these chapters, Borneman utilizes case studies from research he conducted within group therapy

sessions. He traces the movements of sexual offenders through the process of what he calls “ritual rehab” (p. 59). Borneman describes how between being arrested, admitting guilt, receiving treatment, and attempting to reincorporate into society, sexual offenders are categorized and transformed within the public sphere, through their interactions and relationships with different groups. A compelling example of this process, the story of “Konrad,” can be found in Chapter 3. Konrad was arrested for sexually assaulting a 14 year old boy. Subsequently, he was viewed as a molester in the public sphere. He was stigmatized and labeled as a sexual offender. This changed Konrad’s perception of himself as a member of society and he became withdrawn and depressed, initially unwilling to participate in mandated group therapy. Konrad did not recognize his imposed identity as an offender, claiming he believed the boy to have been in love with him. For months he would technically accept that he was “guilty” for having committed sexual acts but tended to feel sorry for himself and little empathy for others. However, once his therapists and group mates began to express compassion for Konrad’s personal history of abuse and past losses, his depression lessened. He felt less stigmatized and was able to obtain an apartment and employment. He opened up more and began to verbally express formerly repressed desires and explain his own past actions without self-pity. His sense of who he was, his “self” transformed from a man in love, to a societal outcast/abuser, to a former victim of abuse on the path to self-understanding and rehabilitation.

This form of rehabilitation Borneman classifies as a modern “secular” ritual. Drawing on classical anthropological theories on liminality and rites of passage (Turner, 1967), Borneman argues that modern ritualistic practices, like rehabilitation, are different than traditional rituals associated with life stages. This is because, rehabilitation is not merely designed to guide a person from one phase of life to another. Rather it is intended to fundamentally reconstruct the “self” or interiority of the individual in question (p.62). The larger goal, according to Borneman, is to enact social change through transforming particular people in accordance with moral imperatives (p.63).

This section of the text is convincing. Borneman supports his arguments with a substantial amount of ethnographic data derived from direct observations, participatory observations, and a number of interviews conducted over a five year period. His conclusions are well grounded in theoretical work from anthropology, sociology, and psychoanalytic research. Furthermore, he utilizes historical and policy documents, as well as life histories and detailed case studies, such as that of Konrad, throughout the remainder of this section of the text.

It is more difficult to state whether or not Borneman is “convincing” in the other two sections of *Cruel*

*Attachments* as neither the prolegomenon nor “Loose End” revolve around research questions, goals, or arguments per se. However, Borneman does make a couple of interesting and debatable claims that are worth investigating. In the prolegomenon, Borneman compares the role of a therapist to that of an anthropologist in the field. Both are participating in “intimate events” (p.25) with their patients or subjects. Both attempt to remain professional and (ideally) objective, yet by necessity they become an “audience” for the people they work with. By acting as audience, anthropologists become a part of the story their subjects tell about their selves and their lives. According to Borneman, this will always have some sort of impact, typically an unpredictable one. As such, Borneman does not feel anthropologists can accurately imagine and plan how they will engage with subjects prior to entering the field. Claiming we can do so is, in his view, less ethical and more dishonest than an anthropologist forming close emotional ties with fieldwork subjects would be – because the latter anthropologist is at least refusing to reduce her subject to a “use-object” (p.30).

In “Loose End,” Borneman further develops this idea and uses it to critique the processes of designing research projects for funding agencies and review boards. These ideas are interesting and potentially significant for anyone hoping to carry out fieldwork, particular on sensitive topics such as child molestation. However, these are questions that require sustained investigation and debate, and whether or not Borneman is convincing will likely depend upon one’s own perspectives on the ethics of fieldwork. Personally, I found this section of the text compelling but not sufficiently developed. I would look forward to reading more from Borneman on this topic were he to pick up these questions in future projects, as he hinted he would.

*Cruel Attachments* is a compelling yet at times difficult text to reflect upon. It is both a classical work of psychological and sociological anthropology and a reflexive piece, meditating upon the ethics of fieldwork, and relationships between anthropologists and subjects of study. Borneman’s non-traditional style prevents me from critiquing *Cruel Attachments* in a conventional manner. While this ethnography may be frustrating for readers who prefer a more straightforward account, I feel that it is an important contemporary work and essential reading for anthropologists grappling with the question of how to carry out fieldwork in western locales. I would also highly recommend this book to both graduate students of anthropology and working professionals. Borneman’s honesty and clarity of thought regarding the tangled relationships that occur between anthropologists and their subjects forces us to consider our own choices when conducting research, and is certain to spark debate.

## References Cited

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