

Book Reviews

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Totten, M.D. (2000). Guys, Gangs, and Girlfriend Abuse. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

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Mark Totten's book, Guys, Gangs, and Girlfriend Abuse, is an attempt to study and analyze the Sociology of crime, specifically abuse against girlfriends, in relation to gang involvement and marginalized youth. He undergoes an extensive examination of social class, gender, and race, which he hypothesizes, as a combination, has a strong influence over a youth's identity and status in society. Not only does he research the possible aspects that may be contributing factors to the abuse, but he also observes the youth in the extent to which they are able to make sense of their own behaviour. Totten explores three key concepts in his book: (1) familial patriarchal ideology, where the participants who followed this ideology were more likely than others to engage in physical and/or emotional and/or sexual abuse; (2) their definition of masculine identity, in which the participants in the study described masculinity in terms of the traditional male role as being a breadwinner; (3) peer group and gang affiliations. Through the findings, it can be seen that the gangs and the types of people surrounding the participants played a large and crucial role in how they not only viewed themselves, but others as well and these affiliations also dictated the actions they produced (pp. 53-57).

Totten described these youth as having a sense of "[entitlement] to power and privilege" because of the fact that they were males (p. 31). This led to a strong sense of protection over this belief and once they felt vulnerable or inferior in any way, they would use violence or a threat of violence as a way of regaining their superiority. He also believed that experiencing abuse, as a child and/or witnessing abuse against mothers, were high-risk events that are strongly related to

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abuse against girlfriends. In this study, he was able to compare and contrast the differences in the abuse of girlfriends in terms of emotional, physical, and sexual violence in relation to class, gender, race and sexuality of the participants. Totten noticed that abusers displayed the same values and beliefs, which coincided with the rigid definition of masculinity. What he found to be quite intriguing was the incompatibility between what they believed an ideal man should be and who they turned out to be. They looked upon this ideal man as having money, a good job, aggressive and heterosexual. When questioned about their future, many participants felt embarrassed about their economic future. He believed they used violence as a way of displaying their power and superiority over the inferior, in this case being gays, females and other males, and in return they strongly believed this ensured their future as a breadwinning man.

Totten found that among the group of abusers, some of the worst were the ones who were non-heterosexual males. This was due to the fact that they did not want to seem inferior in the presence of their peer groups or gangs. Being non-heterosexual for them meant they lost their masculinity and were therefore, an easy target to be abused by others. Totten describes three types of masculine identity: (1) protest masculinity, where participants would use manipulation and psychological control in the degradation of gays and females. This shows, what Totten believes is the sexual objectification of females. The participants in this study believed that if they kept their girlfriends down and treated them as mere objects of play, where they would be taken and used when pleased, then it would guarantee their own manhood; (2) complicit masculinity, where participants resorted to using verbal abuse against their girlfriends; and (3) negative masculinity, where participants went against what familial patriarchal believers understood men to be like and instead viewed men to be “sensitive, caring, educated and [having] a good job” (p. 55).

The youth in this study turned to gangs because they sought to find a place where they could fit in and be accepted for whom they were and escape their own abusive childhood. It was then through these gangs that they were “socialized into a role of dominance, aggression, and power” (p. 152). Totten explains that gangs and peer groups play an immense role in the way youth grow up and build their own identities. It can play both a positive and a negative role in the life of a youth: positive in terms of providing a sense of acceptance and identity and negative, in terms of promoting abuse. Gangs because of their criminal nature rooted in violence tend to encourage abusive behaviour and patriarchal-authoritarian beliefs. Totten found that many marginalized youth were also given advice from father-like figures to abuse women when they became defiant. His findings suggest that through the advice of peer groups/gangs and father-like figures, youth were more likely to follow the rigid definition of masculinity, which would result in them turning to violence when they felt threatened in any way by their girlfriends

Totten found that many of these youth looked to their fathers as being the heads of the household, who had to be obeyed at all times. He discussed two types of fathers: (1) the biological father, who the youth described as being the “natural” heads of the household that must be obeyed at all times; and (2) the social father, who stepped into the shoes of the biological father, but did not have the right to abuse the mother (p. 181). The participants in this study explained that they would not intervene in a fight between their mothers and biological fathers because they believed the biological father had the right to keep his wife in line and that their fathers would not be using violence against their mothers, had she not deserved it; however, they would step in had it been the social father abusing the mother, simply because the social father has not gained the right nor will he ever to abuse the mother. Interestingly, the youth also used this logic when vehemently denying their own apparent abuse against their girlfriends and

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being adamant about “their mission to rid the community of perceived ‘rapists’ and woman beaters.” Totten explains their way of thinking by concluding that because these abused women are not the girlfriends of these men, their violent actions are therefore unable to be justified, thus leaving it up to others to teach them a lesson (p. 189).

Guys, Gangs, and Girlfriend Abuse brings to light the thought processes of marginalized youth, their involvement in gangs and how their involvement, class, gender and race play an important role in their view of abuse against females. However, a limitation I found with Totten’s study was the one sided data collected. The data would have benefited, had Totten included the girlfriends of these youth in the sample. This would have provided more insight to the abuse, the initial cause of the abuse and the role played by the females in it. Totten has gotten inside the minds of marginalized youth and gotten them to think about their actions and why they are justifying them. I found this book to be comprehensive, enlightening, easy to read and engaging. Psychology would be another discipline alongside Sociology that would greatly benefit from this study. I also believe this book is a valuable resource for parents, social workers and school teachers.