

Book Reviews

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Totten, M.D. (2001). Guys, Gangs and Girlfriend Abuse. Toronto: University of Toronto Press

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Mark Totten's book, Guys, Gangs and Girlfriend Abuse is a primary study of the influence family and peer groups or gangs have on the likelihood of marginal male youth to become girlfriend abusers. Most abuse related research focuses on already abusive adults and their marital relations. Totten's book examines a topic not largely studied, the establishment of abusive behaviours. In his study, Totten interviews male youth ranging in ages from thirteen to seventeen from various economic backgrounds and investigates their development of understanding gender roles as well as what it means to be a man. A precaution for anyone who chooses to read this book, the interviews performed by Totten include very explicit content in most cases which can be considered derogatory towards women, homosexuals and racial minorities. In an attempt to explain all aspects of girlfriend abuse, Totten incorporates aspects of multiple theoretical approaches including: sociobiological, physiological, intrapsychic, social learning, sex/gender role socialization, routine activities, resource, social control and general systems, feminist, social construction of masculinity, youth subculture and peer group/gang theories. These theories led to the three main concepts underlying Totten's interviews: (1) the types of violence related to marginalization; (2) the influence of family and peer groups on ideologies; and (3) the development of family and gender ideologies which impact these male youth (p. 41). The book is organized into chapters almost chronologically moving from background information to the interviews and ending with a summary of his findings including areas for future research.

Totten came up with unambiguous definitions of physical, emotional and sexual abuse with classification criterion. The initial screening interviews were used to create these definitions and guidelines. The interviews were done with ninety male youth and consisted of questions about their education, sexuality, living situation, family, friends and previous experiences with abusive behaviour. Physical violence was defined as “a minimum of five separate incidences of minor violence (throwing objects, pushing, grabbing, shoving, slapping) and/or one incident of severe violence (kicking, punching, hitting with objects, beating, choking, threatening with a knife or gun, and using a knife or gun on them)” (pp. 19-20). Emotional abuse was a large class containing threats of violence or death, throwing/kicking items to cause fear and accusations of infidelity (p.20). Sexual abuse was defined as sexual touching with the use of threats of physical force or actual physical force and penetration of an orifice without consent by force, threat or intentional incapacitation (p. 21). These definitions of abuse were used in the study to determine what the boys did and did not view as abusive behaviour towards women as well as what forms of abuse they had been exposed to.

Many of the young males interviewed in the book described the ideal man as being a heterosexual male with a job, material possessions, the respect of his family and who can defend or protect his family physically. Totten points out that the young men equated being financially successful with being successful as a man even though many of their fathers had rarely worked. Colin, a sixteen year old, described the way in which these men without jobs could maintain their manhood: “As long as a man’s got a wife and kids who respect him, do as he says, and he’s tough enough to stand up for himself, he can get by without the rest” (p. 79). The inability of these marginal male youth to become providers financially has led to the use of dominance and violence as a means of establishing manliness. The shift in achieving manhood may account for

increases in girlfriend abuse especially in youth unable to assert dominance over males in their community.

Totten also points out the use of social pressure on these young men to be abusive with their girlfriends through not only peer groups or gangs but also male family members. Nolan, a seventeen year old, explained explicitly how some of his male family members would promote sexual abuse: "My uncle's told me that if you do things for a girl she's got to fuck you" (p. 104). Sexual assault is the most abundant assault discussed in the book relating to girlfriends and conveys two general themes related to proving manhood: (1) asserting male dominance and (2) proving heterosexuality. The young men grow up in environments which reinforce traditional gender role beliefs through their male caregiver's physical and sexual assertion of dominance on the women of the family. The marginal male youth expressed in their ideals of manhood a heterosexual male head-of-household figure which is reinforced in their daily interactions. Bob, a sixteen year old, crudely explains, while sobbing, the pressure placed on these young men to live up to the ideal man: "I guess I am trying to prove myself to my friends. I mean, would you like to be called a faggot and a pussy all the time? I gotta show them that I can fuck, and fuck a lot. I'm no queer" (p.125). Totten illustrates through the use of these interviews the social forces acting upon these marginal male youth which lead to their abusive behaviours towards women.

Throughout the entire book, Totten makes it extremely clear that these boys have strong traditional gender role beliefs. The boys idolize the men in their family and consider them to be the heads of the household even when the women are bringing in money from work or welfare cheques. The jobs of women are considered to be of less value than those of men and there is a pronounced association of women with the home and childrearing. Women, in general, seem to be undervalued by the men interviewed. Colin expressed these traditional gender role beliefs the

best in stating: “My dad earned the bacon. He brought home the money. He shoulda got the house. She’s nothin’ without him. It’s not fair. A man makes the decisions at home. He’s the head of the joint. The woman should stay at home. It’s the woman’s job. Men don’t do dishes. They don’t do nothin’ inside. He’s doing the real work. He’s got the pay cheque” (p. 86).

Totten’s probing questions towards these boys demonstrate their deeply seeded gender ideologies developed through familial and peer group interactions.

Totten’s intended readership consists of policymakers, criminal justice system officials, elementary school teachers, social services professionals, family support program creators and government officials. The book would be useful to these readers in giving a better understanding of the many factors that lead to abusive behaviour in marginal male youth. The study would also be helpful in developing more appropriate support services to reduce the number of abusive males in our communities through financial support, increased convictions and earlier prevention.

Totten sought to acquire a better understanding of the perspective of marginal male youth abusing women. The goal was to learn how these boys made sense of their behaviour and how abusive behaviour is a social construction. Initially Totten wanted to compare types of abusive behaviour between family social classes however he was unable to attain statistically significant differences. An increase in the sample size of male youth interviewed may have given him the ability to compare classes. Although Totten is attempting to bring together many variables that can affect abusive behaviour of male youth, the large number of variables made the book difficult to follow at times. I wonder if bringing sexual and racial minorities into the discussion with such small sample size of these variables is truly representative of the true population. I found pages with multiple tables and small areas of text between them hard to read. A suggestion

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for incorporating tables would be to place them in an appendix or having the tables together followed by a single block of text below them with references to the table. Overall, the book was engaging, insightful and very informative therefore, I would recommend it to anyone interested in better understanding the influences behind abusive behaviour.