

Book Reviews

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

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Guys, Gangs, & Girlfriend Abuse by Mark D. Totten is an exploratory study which provides an in depth account of the development of pro-abusive social behaviours for socially and economically marginalized Canadian youth. Totten interviews male youth, who engage in sexually, emotionally, and physically abusive behaviours toward their girlfriends, to uncover how these young men experience, understand, and rationalize their social behaviours. He notes that research into girlfriend abuse has traditionally examined its effects on the girls, generated statistics, and ignored the development of abusive attitudes and behaviours in boys. Initially, Totten sought to examine and detail the significance of class in the development of girlfriend abuse, but he found that class played only a minimal role in the development of abusive behaviours. Thus, Guys, Gangs, & Girlfriend Abuse presents the real life accounts of young men and their social and economic marginalization to explain the evolution of familial and gender ideologies conducive of patriarchal and pro-abusive behaviours. Totten's research study presents a departure from statistical analysis, incorporates a qualitative/narrative approach, and offers a Canadian perspective.

Totten begins his study by conducting preliminary interviews with a non-random sample of 90 male youth between the ages of thirteen and seventeen. A non-random sample was utilized in order to select participants with a history of abuse, pro-abuse peer group membership, or gang affiliation. The purpose of these interviews was to develop questions for subsequent interviews, apply key concepts from additional literature, select candidates for a second set of in-depth

interviews, and to develop core concepts. A cohort of thirty participants was selected for a second interview where insights from preliminary interviews were leveraged. Safety and ethics were of concern given the real possibility of criminality and harm to self or others. Totten informed participants of their legal rights, as well as declaring his legal responsibility to report “life-threatening criminal activity [and] child abuse/neglect and suicidal behaviour” to the proper authorities and/or agencies (pp. 16-17). While Totten selected participants who consented to having their past and present girlfriends contacted for verification purposes, this aspect of the study was not implemented owing to concerns that the safety of the girls might be compromised.

Participants were selected from lists provided by local organizations and some were personally recruited outside a local mall. Totten acknowledges that some participant accounts may be untruthful, however he argues that these inconsistencies are trivial. His goal is to understand how these youth come to rationalize and understand themselves in relation to others. The in-depth interviews of 30 marginal male youths provided valuable insights into the development of familial and gender ideologies supportive of male dominance and abuse towards girlfriends, minorities, and homosexuals.

Of the three areas researched by Totten, the development of familial and gender ideologies in the home is of most significance. Totten writes that “by focusing on these ideologies the relationship between poverty and abuse can be qualified” (p. 69). He notes five central themes in these youths’ patriarchal beliefs: gender division in society is a natural, inherent state rather than a social construct, women and men should adhere to strict roles with men having dominance, heterosexual primacy, the use of violence as a legitimate means of social control, and the exaltation of sex and violence (p. 70). Totten indicates that most participants noted instances in which their fathers, or father figures, committed acts of abuse toward them

and/or their mothers. Totten found that many participants exhibited forms of cognitive dissonance; participants noted their role as protectors of women and masculinity whilst simultaneously engaging in abuse towards girlfriends. Many participants recalled witnessing or experiencing abuse themselves, however many claimed to have been unaffected and rationalized their abusive upbringing (p. 111). Totten theorizes that participants' reluctance to admit experiencing and perpetrating abuse stems from poor articulation of their experiences as well as a reluctance to engage in the 'feminine' activity of expressing "feelings [that] are not considered masculine" (p. 111). Totten found that participants who lived with their biological father and exhibited abusive and patriarchal behaviours were more likely to become supportive of these attitudes than were participants with 'social' fathers; especially if social fathers were economically dependent on the mother (p. 112). His research revealed that some participants became girlfriend abusers in the absence of adherence to patriarchal beliefs and in spite the fact they explicitly denied condoning abuse against women. His findings support previous research which indicates social learning of abuse at a young age can develop into patriarchal and pro-abusive ideology later in life (p. 115).

Totten's research into the development of gender and patriarchal ideologies at home does not explain how some participants from 'harmonious' and equitable homes developed into girlfriend abusers. The subsequent chapter focuses on the development of these patriarchal and gender ideologies outside the home. Totten found that a bleak economic outlook caused a "negation of male privilege attained through wealth and high status" thus they reduced the terms of masculinity to those things that are within their means – "fucking and fighting" (p. 123) Some participants broke down and cried when questioned about their economic prospects. Previous studies indicated that abusers typically do not engage in all three forms of sexual abuse however,

Totten found that the majority of the 30 participants engaged in all three (p. 132). This may be an anomaly resulting from Totten's use of a non-random sample. His findings suggest that the development of masculinity for these youths comprises both "passive gender role socialization and [an] active negotiation and resistance" to traditional forms of masculine identity outside their sphere of influence (p. 154). Interestingly, Totten's research indicates sexual minorities engaged in hyper-heterosexual activity and gay bashing, which he suggests is symptomatic of a strong desire to be perceived as the 'ideal man' amongst peer groups.

Insights from chapters dedicated to the development of familial and gender ideologies in the home and outside the home informed his chapter on the significance of gang involvement. Totten notes that gangs provide "acceptance and belonging, yet at the same time they [threaten] the masculine identity of their individual members" (p. 157). He notes a genealogical schism; participants who witnessed their mothers being abused by social fathers were more likely to beat 'stranger-rapists' and wife beaters because they believe these males "lack the moral authority" over these women due to a conflict in roles (p. 172). Conversely, the majority of participants "received instructions to physically and sexually abuse, had attachment to abusive peers, and had peers who held pro-abusive beliefs" (p. 174). Totten's study disputes prevailing research which suggests that peer groups are central to the development of patriarchal and gender ideologies and makes a case that these ideologies are instead "grounded in the family of origin" (p. 175). According to Totten, gangs provide marginalized youths with an environment that fosters pro-abusive ideologies while legitimizing acts of violence by providing a "vocabulary of adjustment" and a social foundation of support (p. 175). Attraction to gangs is seen as a response to a lack of viable alternatives to acquire social status indicative of hegemonic masculinity while serving as a way to express forms of familial and gender ideologies acquired as a result of family violence.

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Totten's use of personal narratives and statistics provide a valuable perspective regarding the evolution of pro-abusive ideologies. It is unfortunate that his frequent use of acronyms works to the detriment of the study by needlessly confusing the reader. Even more perplexing is that, apart from a ten dollar honorarium given to each participant in the research study, Totten never attempts to ascertain what motivates his research subjects to take part in this study, especially given the fact that all of them have been warned that he will report serious criminal activities to the appropriate authorities.

Totten's study provides a detailed look into the dynamics of how these young men develop, rationalize, and ultimately come to abuse women yet he ignores the role of women in his study. Mothers are stereotypically portrayed as passive and detached while the fathers are consistently acknowledged as the chief abusers. Secondly, his study does little to explain why girls also choose to join gangs and engage in criminal and abusive behaviours or the role of siblings.

Totten expresses his hope that the qualitative research results presented in his book will ultimately serve to increase the safety of abused women by providing an impetus to positive social change through meaningful, practical and knowledge-based approaches and policies (p.13). He also outlines some additional avenues of supplemental research into the development of familial and gender ideologies. Scholars, parents, youth advocates and those working in the criminal justice system will benefit greatly from Totten's insights into the social learning of abuse. Warning: coarse language, violent and sexual content. I enjoyed Guys, Gangs & Girlfriend Abuse and would highly recommend it to anyone interested in a qualitative/narrative approach to marginal male youths in Canada that humanizes the abusers in a dynamic social context.