

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, presents Totten's own research on young males' abusive behaviour towards girlfriends within the existing body of literature. Totten presents a well-rounded and informative account of abusive male behaviour. He employs a sociological approach that builds upon other theoretical works and provides new insights as to how young men understand and rationalize their abusive behaviours towards women. Totten uses qualitative research methods to conduct in-depth interviews with thirty young males in order to understand abuse through the eyes of the perpetrators. He categorizes and analyzes his participants' responses and compares and contrasts their understanding of their abuse. Totten explains how abuse against girlfriends is contingent upon several reoccurring themes seen throughout his research. His book illustrates the impact that familial and gender ideologies have on young marginalized males' view of masculinity. These rigid ideologies are established and maintained by families, male peer groups and gangs. The connections he makes between masculinity, family and peers/gangs shows the important role these themes serve in establishing, maintaining and rationalizing males physical, sexual and emotional abuse towards girlfriends and also towards gays and visible minorities.

Totten approaches the issue of men's abuse against women by employing an interpretative social-constructionist standpoint which draws upon different areas of sociological thought. Totten outlines the types of abuse that he looks at in his study, namely physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. After screening participants for social and economic marginalization and the

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use of different forms of abuse, Totten raises a number of important questions which allow him to gauge the effects that family and peer/gangs have on masculine ideologies. He explains the connection between types of abuse used against girlfriends and ideological influences. During Tottens interviews, the way in which young males perceive their abusive behaviour became evident.

Totten explores the ways in which marginalized male youth develop their abusive behaviours by analyzing participants familial and gender ideologies found within and outside the home. His research illustrates the strong relation between rigid family orientation and gender roles and how they influence males' abusive behaviour. This patriarchal-authoritarian ideology shaped the way young males saw themselves and their girlfriends and became the lens through which they understood their abusive behaviours. Through his interviews, Totten found that many of the participants had witnessed their fathers abuse their mothers and experienced abuse themselves, but because they believed their father was the head of the household and was the “breadwinner,” his abuse was justifiable when keeping his family members “in line” (p. 180). By looking at the differences in males growing up in harmonious families versus those who grew up in abusive families, Totten was able to explain the different influences that effect males' abusive behaviour. Young males from harmonious families were influenced more by people outside the home such as peers and gangs, whereas those growing up in abusive households were more likely to be influenced by familial and gender ideologies within the home.

Totten's book shows how young males' ideas of masculinity are intertwined with and are a result of participants' rigid family and gender ideologies. Participants understood masculinity in terms of money, jobs, material wealth and being able to provide and protect one's family. Because the participants were economically marginalized, they found other ways of maintaining

their masculinity by being “powerful, sexual, fighting machines” (p. 184). If they could not fulfill the economic criteria of being masculine, they could achieve it by being “heterosexual, [physically tough], and protecting [their] families from harm” (p. 185). These attitudes towards masculinity were reiterated inside the home by family members and outside the home by peer groups and gangs. These ideas of masculinity lead to abusive behaviours towards women.

The book addressed the resonating connection between participants' abusive behaviour and the time they spent with male peers and gangs. Male peers and gangs were a key site for rigid gender ideologies to be established and reinforced. Totten stated that “all of the 27 young men who reported that they had male peers who were physically and/ or sexually abusive had witnessed and/ or taken part in at least one collective act of girlfriend abuse with these friends” (p. 188). Male peers had a significant impact on participants' use of abuse towards their own girlfriends. Comparing participants who spent time with male peers to those who were involved in gang affiliations demonstrated the different forms and severity of abuse associated with each group. Both male peers and gangs “played a significant role in threatening as well as reinforcing the construction of male identity in opposition to females, gays, and minorities: if these adolescents did not dominate these people, they were perceived to be less of a man” (p. 189). In the case of young males' abusive behaviour towards girlfriends, Totten's study does a nice job of illustrating how peers and gangs establish and reinforce ideologies of gender and masculinity.

Totten's research was conducted with the intention of filling in the gaps about what is unknown about males' abusive behaviour towards girlfriends. Using a qualitative and sociological approach, Totten hoped his study would usher in new information on male abuse which could be useful in lowering rates of violence against women. Totten's book set out to increase awareness and safety of women who are abused by going to the source of the problem.

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The book did a good job of bringing in new information in a readable and comprehensible fashion as well as providing readers with some practical ways of dealing with and preventing males abusive behaviour towards women, gays, and visible minorities.

Although Totten's research is incredibly insightful and proposes social policies and practical implications for his research, I'm not sure his research can produce the immediate outcomes Totten is hoping for. I don't think this book will be entirely effective in preventing young males abusive behaviour because of the number of factors involved in establishing and maintaining their abusive behaviour. In particular, family and male peers gendered ideologies could prove potentially difficult to control or prevent because those values are intergenerational and are internalized from a young age. Because these ideas are immersed in their culture and have provided young males with a sense of self, they may be less willing to change their ways. As is clear with Totten's book, abusive behaviour towards girlfriends is much more complex than it may first appear which may make it that much more difficult to try and stop it from within. This book is an excellent point of reference and is a good start to lowering the rates of abuse against women, but to change these beliefs may require more time and research on this subject. That being said, I think more research on economic marginalization of male youth would be useful because Totten's study has an undertone of economic disparity which propels males' abusive behaviour.

Overall, I enjoyed reading Guys, Gangs, and Girlfriend Abuse. I found the literature review and the methods section to be a bit dry, however, I understand they were necessary for framing and building upon his research. I was impressed with Totten's ability to approach a highly sensitive and at times an offensive topic, in an objective and respectful way. The book was very well written and the research he conducted was demonstrative of the influence that different

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facets of social life have on males' abusive behaviour. Ultimately, the book was very informative, easy to read, concise, and the qualitative interview excerpts were extremely illustrative of the deeper issues involved in abusive behaviour against women. Being as I found this book very educational and insightful, I would suggest it to anyone. That being said, the book could be very beneficial to a number of disciplines including Sociology, Criminology, Gender studies, Social work, and Education. Because Totten uses a sociological approach to study abuse, I think this book would be particularly useful to students and professors of Sociology in terms of furthering their knowledge and understanding of how social life influences youth and their relationships. It might also prove useful to those who would like to implement social organizations that offer awareness and assistance for young men and women who are abusing or are being abused.