

Book Reviews

Canadian Journal of Family and Youth, 7(1), 2015, pp 217-221
ISSN 1718-9748 © University of Alberta
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Totten, M.D. (2001). Guys, Gangs and Girlfriend Abuse. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

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Mark D. Totten's book, Guys, Gangs and Girlfriend Abuse explores how marginal male youth make sense of their physical, emotional, and sexual abuse towards their girlfriends. In his study, Totten tries to address some of the limitations of existing studies on girlfriend abuse, which targets the description of females who have been victimized by males, and focuses his study on the qualitative, in-depth interviews that question the male abusers reasoning for their violent behaviour. Many different theories are used to understand the intentions and motives behind abusive male youth, which highlights the complexity of this research. With this in mind, Totten focuses on the development and impact of familial and gender ideologies among the men in two prominent areas: their families and male peer groups/gangs (p. 179). The book consistently organizes Totten's research in ways that allows us to better analyze the actions of marginal male youth abusers from their perspective.

Totten makes sense of the abusive behaviour of these males by directly relating their familial and gender ideologies to the ones they learned in the home. He is able to explain that the patriarchal beliefs that many of the participants hold are a direct result of their abusive experiences as a child. Throughout the interviews, Totten is faced with many examples of these male youths explaining painful experiences of how their fathers would "beat the shit out of [themselves] and [their] moms" (p.107), which allows him to connect the participant's abusive behaviour and ideologies with their own development of masculinity. Totten uses social learning,

sex/gender roles, and socialization theories to explain how the participants justified the abuse they experienced at home (p. 102).

The adherence to patriarchal models of family and gender were not uniform throughout all the samples, however. Totten discusses the differences between these men, such as being an ethno-racial or sexual minority, or living in a harmonious family, and concludes that “these youth developed their ideological assumptions about family and gender through different processes” (p. 182), more specifically, through peers and groups/gangs. Totten is able highlight the major difference between groups and gangs by understanding that gangs offer an individual acceptance through crime. He uses the social learning theory to help deconstruct the abusive behaviour of the men who did not receive their ideological beliefs from the family setting alone, stating that the majority of the men “had witnessed and/ or taken part in at least one collective act of girlfriend abuse with [their] friends” (p. 188). Totten discovers that group/gang affiliation plays an extensive role in determining these youthful male’s ideological preference.

Intertwined with the abuse experienced inside and outside the home, Totten relates the ideologies of family and gender with the youthful male’s own definitions of masculinity. He discovers that most of the participant’s definitions were “attained through heterosexuality [and] physical toughness” (p. 123). The male patriarchal ideology and the theme of hating femininity were very prominent among these men and their definitions, and Totten discovers that some of the worst offenders were the non-heterosexual males trying to prove their masculinity to their peers. Furthermore, the youth that believed they could not gain their masculinity through resources such as money, cars and houses (p. 76), felt the need to prove themselves through the abuse of their girlfriends. Totten continuously uses the resource theory to explain masculinity throughout his study.

Totten's study shows that most of the gang members came from families that supported women abuse. These men, although they claimed to respect women, often committed the more severe crimes towards their girlfriends, and their masculinity was threatened by femininity. Gang members were as well more likely to abuse males on the street that had feminine qualities. Totten again uses resource theory to explain the abusive behaviour of these youth. In one example, one of the participants explained that "if his girlfriend had more money than he did, this would be considered as an implicit put-down" (p. 127).

Totten concludes his study by focusing on areas within society, such as poverty, unemployment, and the criminal justice system, that have serious problems which need to be addressed. His conclusion reads:

...The types of issues raised here point to the necessity of addressing fundamental problems with the nature of our social order. The social problems of child abuse, wife assault, youth violence, poverty, and unemployment cannot be effectively confronted without making basic changes to the social relations of power in patriarchal-capitalist society. To the extent to which these social relations of gender, class, and race continue to be translated into power differences, these social problems will persist. However, these proposed initiatives, if undertaken in a comprehensive manner, may begin to chip away at patriarchal structures and ideologies. Practical steps can go a long way in confronting the social problem of girlfriend abuse. These small steps can result in longer-term social change. (p. 201)

Filled with in-depth examples and references, detailing the qualitative research of abusive marginal male youth against their girlfriends, Totten's book focuses on the limitations of many

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other studies, and explores the male reasoning behind girlfriend abuse. He structures his book by concluding two very important objectives. First, Totten includes many different aspects of race, class and gender into his research which allows for an overall understanding of the life experiences his participants went through. Second, it highlights the importance of familial and gender ideologies, as well as intertwines these ideas through the entire study, and shows the impact that family abuse and group/gang membership can have on a person's idea of masculinity (p. 188). Totten achieves these objectives by showing relevance through many different theories, such as the resource, social learning and feminist theory.

The intended audience that may benefit from reading this book would include teachers, parents, public health officials and policy makers. I would also recommend this book for anyone doing fieldwork, including social anthropologists, and it would as well be an eye-opening read for women and anyone majoring in women's studies. Totten's research would be a useful teaching, and reference resource for any post-secondary student focusing on issues related to familial and gender ideologies; it provides an insight into the world of girlfriend abuse.

Although Totten's research was aimed directly at addressing the limitations regarding other studies on girlfriend abuse- focusing on the youthful male abusers rather than their girlfriends that are being abused- some of the participants may not have been entirely truthful during their in-depth interviews, which would ultimately cause a drawback to his research. Totten mentions, and is fully aware of this drawback, and accepts that this will always be a limitation when dealing with qualitative data. I am curious, however, how drastically the interviews would have differed if the participants were completely honest all of the time. Acknowledging that it is impossible to have a study without error, I would not suggest that Totten would do anything differently with his research. He profoundly organizes his exploration

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of the abuse done by marginal male youth in an interesting manner, and allows room for reception of his research from numerous disciplines. There are many other areas of study that could benefit from reading this book such as education, law, film studies, and especially sociology. I found “Guys, Gangs and Girlfriend Abuse” an intriguing book to read, filled with engaging information that was easy to follow. It explored areas of abuse that we often do not hear about, and I would recommend this book to anyone interested in the topic of girlfriend abuse.