

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 an analysis of "an integrative perspective which combines individual and societal-level factors in the explanation of girlfriend abuse" (p.14). It is an insight to a world behind closed doors and what truly exists in domestic and family violence ridden homes, which demonstrates the eventuality of these actions on its residing youth. Totten dissects thirty interviewed cases of abusers, matching them all with common premise for evaluation. In addition, the book is organized based on developing familial and gender ideologies established at home, the streets, and in gangs for the purpose of understanding the participants reasoning behind their actions at different facets of their lives.

The thirty subjects interviewed by Totten vary from several different backgrounds; each impacting every respondent antithetically. Diversing from social class, ethno-racial minorities, sexual orientation, independent/dependent place of residence, and whether they had lived with a biological or social father figure in one point of their life, resulted in a plethora of possibilities pertaining to the interviewed participants. What they all basically had in common was the abusive relationship they shared with their girlfriends.

With familial and gender ideologies, there are two main concepts to be tested in the screening interviews. The first was made up of two main components, which were their adherence to familial patriarchal beliefs, and approval of using physical violence against girlfriends. These are reoccurring themes highlighted by Totten that are continuously taken into account when analyzing the participants' behaviour. The second concept "developed as a result

of the screening interviews was the definition of masculine identity, which refers to both the subjective inner space and sense of self and to relate individual's behaviours" (p.54). Participants were required to define what an ideal man was, and majority of answers concurred. "Tough, aggressive, and muscular" (p.54) was a common answer amongst 95 per cent of the abusers. Expanding on their definitions of masculinity, is being self sufficient financially. Contradictorily twenty-eight out of the thirty participants acknowledged the fact that they wouldn't have a established economic future. They further preoccupied in "fucking and fighting" (p.151) to compensate for this existing gap.

Totten uses several theoretical approaches in his evaluation of participants. One that is reoccurring is Bandura's Social Learning Theory. Observational learning is the main component of The Social Learning Theory, and this is precisely what takes place with the abusers. Totten explains how there is a link between witnessing abuse at a young age, and perpetrating it later in adulthood. Not only are child witnesses of abuse more likely to initiate similar behaviour themselves, they are more likely to develop "high levels of behavioural problems and low levels of social competence and higher levels of internalizing behaviour compared to children who have not witnessed martial violence" (p.28). All participants witnessed physical, emotional, or sexual abuse towards their mothers, with addition towards themselves, which then later impacted their perception towards the treatment of women as a whole. They perceived this notion as "manly", which again is linked to their definition of an "ideal man". Adding to this belief was the impact of poverty, or unemployment on the abusers' father figures. "A significant amount of researchers have argued that poverty, with the associated stress of unemployment, low status jobs and lack of resources, is a major contributing factor to violence" (p.29) Which further draws towards The Resource Theory of Analysis. Although majority of their fathers were either

unemployed or worked very low paying jobs, they still made the association of being a man with their breadwinner ideology. As a result of their failure to perfect the aspect of being the provider and income producer, these abusers regain their power by lashing out on those helpless to them in order to restore balance (p.34). An interesting point that was identified was the the rebellion of the youth who were unsure about their sexual orientation. Those who were gay, bisexual, or questioned their sexual orientation lashed out on gays to further establish their heterosexuality to their peers and gang members. Since being gay didn't fit into their description of being an ideal man, proving their heterosexuality to their peers contribute to their abusive behaviour. "Gay bashing and heterosexual relations with girlfriends were useful ways to negotiate masculinity for many of these young men" (p.129).

Since the majority of the participants did not live at home, they had built strong relations with their male peers on the streets, and eventually with gang members. Even if they had lived at home, they either had little to no contact with their families. Their gangs provided them with refuge and acceptance, a new identity, where all additional members shared the same ideologies, and emerged from analogous backgrounds. Totten explains the impact of these environments on the abusers, since it further heightened their abusive culture. He also explains that if there isn't a healthy and strong bond between care-givers and their children, then children may resort to a rebellious and unsuccessful transition into adolescents and adulthood, which could be established which is a major component to their radical behaviour. Furthermore, the participants were instructed by their abusive father figures to abuse women, witnessed abuse at home, or acknowledged peer pressure and expectations from their male cohorts which all contribute to the abusive nature they developed (p.155).

Totten's work is exceptionally productive for sociologists, counselling psychologists, and family and youth social workers, since it gives an insight to the deeper imbedded issues woven within abusive and chaotic male youth. Not only does it provide insight towards the perpetrator's perspective, but with educational programming, it also may act as a guideline towards young women who are victims of these crimes. It will enable them to (1) recognize signs of an abusive boyfriend before a relationship has been established, and (2) provide them with an accurate perceptivity of their actions if they do decide to remain with these partners. Aside from using the content for educational purposes, I believe that Totten has established a fundamental resource for raising awareness and creating consciousness to the lives of both the penetrator and victim.

Totten's intention when writing this book was for the reason to "explore how male youth who are abusive make sense of their behaviour, (...) how [readers] as outside observers can better understand their world from their viewpoint" (p.13). This is the most important component of his study since it provides us with a better analysis of their world. Furthermore, his project was created with the motive to address already existing limitations in current studies related to girlfriend abuse (p.179). Through his organization of information based on developing familial and gender ideologies established at home, the streets, and in gangs; this creates a uniform and constructive bases to follow for interpreting the participants mindsets from every aspect possible. A limitation I personally faced when reading the book was how Totten failed to incorporate males of both younger and older age. If children younger than the age of thirteen were incorporated into the study, it would have been interesting to see their attitude towards abuse and whether they likewise coincided with the opinions of the older abusive youth. Furthermore, it also would have been intriguing to see the opinions of older males, and whether their maturation (if it was a factor to begin with) would have impacted their outlook on abuse. A point of

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improvement the author should have made was further allowing readers more discernment towards the interviews he had with the participants. This would have enabled readers to acknowledge a better understanding of the abusers, since I personally enjoyed reading the passages between the author and the participants in the study.