Girlfriend Abuse as a Form of Masculinity Construction among Violent, Marginal Male Youth

MARK TOTTEN
Youth Services Bureau of Ottawa

This study focuses on the development and effect of familial and gender ideologies on the masculine identities of thirty marginal male youth aged thirteen to seventeen years, all of whom were gang members or belonged to violent male peer groups. Qualitative, in-depth interviews uncovered protest and negative masculine identities. Their abusive behavior, directed at girlfriends, gays, and racial minorities, is suggested to be a response to blocked access to traditional institutional benefits of patriarchy. Violence compensated for perceived threats to their masculine identities. The construction of masculinity was an ongoing process for these boys, negotiated and developed on a daily basis using available resources in their social space location. Significant differences within the sample explain the variation in the degree to which they embraced patriarchal-authoritarian models of family and gender, and variation in the forms and seriousness of their physical and sexual violence.

Key words: youth violence, gangs, girlfriend abuse, masculinity, child maltreatment

Male violence against women is a major problem in Western, postindustrial societies (Johnson 1996; O’Neil and Harway 1997; Thorne-Finch 1992). Statistics Canada’s Violence Against Women Survey (VAWS) estimates that 51 percent of Canadian women have experienced at least one incident of physical or sexual assault since the age of sixteen. A large body of survey data suggests that male-to-female physical, sexual, and psychological assaults in dating relationships are common on Canadian and American university and college campuses (Barnes, Greenwood, and Sommer 1991; DeKeseredy and Schwartz 1998; Stets and Henderson 1991). Data on the extent of girlfriend abuse in high school and elementary school dating relationships suggests that girlfriend abuse is likewise a serious problem in these settings. These assaults pose a significant threat to the health and well-being of these young women (Coffey et al. 1996; Totten 2000).

While statistics on this issue are available, there is an absence of research on male youth that provides theoretical analysis and qualitative under-
standing of this phenomenon (O’Neil and Harway 1999; O’Neil and Nadeau 1999; Schwartz 1988). Furthermore, although some studies suggest that violent interpersonal assaults are most prevalent among those with the least resources, especially younger people (McKendy 1997; Messerschmidt 1993; O’Keefe 1998), there is an absence of girlfriend abuse research among those who are less privileged. This study addresses these issues.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF MASCULINITY

There is a growing body of evidence suggesting that masculinity and femininity are constructed differently according to the social conditions in which people are situated. Social construction of masculinity theorists, such as James Messerschmidt, consider masculinity to be a malleable trait, constructed and reconstructed daily in relationships with other people. He contends that violence against women is but one resource at hand to construct masculinity. Men in different structural spaces may employ different forms of violence based on resources available to achieve their gender. Depending on the structural space occupied, different forms of ideologies may be embraced over time, explaining how different subgroups of men use various types of abuse, and also why many men are not abusive. Dominant and subordinate masculinity types are formed through practices that perpetuate stratified relationships between men, and between men and women (Connell 1995; Messerschmidt 1993, 1997). The individual and collective practice of oppressive gender relations occurs within the context of social structures.

Maleness is neither determined wholly by social structures, historical practices, and cultural scripts, nor by predetermined genetic and psychological makeup (Coleman 1990). Masculinity as a personal practice can be understood only within the context of societal institutions (such as the state, the workplace/labor market, the family) and history; it is created and expressed through personal, interpersonal, institutional, and cultural practices (Connell 1993). Robert Connell (1993, 602) remarks that “masculinity is an aspect of institutions, and is produced in institutional life, as much as it is an aspect of personality or produced in interpersonal transactions.” He delineates the historical evolution of contemporary, hegemonic forms of masculinity in patriarchal-capitalist society. Using cross-cultural data on varied gender practices of men in different social orders, Connell maintains that the concept of masculinity derives meaning only within a specified culture.

In Euro-American culture, universal norms of masculinity are identifiable, although not absolute. The main patterns of contemporary hegemonic masculinity are the subordination of women, the marginalization of gay men, and the connection of masculinity to toughness and competitiveness (Coleman 1990; Connell 1993; Messerschmidt 1993). Liddle (1989)
hypothesizes that hegemonic masculinity in patriarchal-capitalist society contains successful individual and group practices for the subordination of women and nonheterosexual men. Hegemonic forms of masculinity imply that “the reproduction of gender categories is never automatic, and that the maintenance of domination is a multi-levelled phenomenon which involves a dynamic mixture of coercion and consent” (Liddle 1989, 70). The sociology of masculinity literature suggests that this complex range of gendered power relations perpetuates the domination of heterosexual men over women in general, and over all other male gender types.

Messerschmidt (1993) maintains that men and women construct their behavior with significant other people in their lives as essentially masculine or feminine; gendered responses are the reactions of men and women to their unique social situation (e.g., school, workplace, family, peer group) and their unique social position (e.g., ethno-racial origin, social class, sexual orientation). Masculine identity is therefore not the product simply of passive socialization. It is the outcome of active negotiation and even resistance. Connell (1995, 114) notes that “an active process of grappling with a situation, and constructing ways of living in it, is central to the making of gender.” As such, “doing” masculinity involves actively responding to situations: individual difference and personal agency are key ingredients. In the project of hegemonic masculinity, there is direct participation, conscious complicity, ignorance, and opposition by men (Liddle 1989). There are open challenges to dominant forms of masculinity by feminism and gay liberation in Western, industrialized society.

**METHOD**

The purpose of this exploratory study was to explore how young girlfriend abusers construct their masculinity in the context of economic and social marginalization. A multiphase research design examined the key concepts of familial patriarchal ideology, masculine identity, and male peer group/gang affiliations. The analysis focuses on the development and effect of familial and gender ideologies on masculine identities in two primary sites of ideological influence: families and peer groups/gangs. A quantitative approach was used in 90 screening interviews with a purposive, nonrepresentative sample of ninety male youth, aged thirteen to seventeen years (recruited from a suburban shopping mall and social service agencies) to test preconceived concepts (male peer support; familial patriarchal and pro-abuse beliefs; social and economic marginalization; physical, emotional, and sexual abuse; peer groups and gangs; and masculine ideals). Existing scales were replicated in structured interviews. From the screening sample, thirty marginal, abusive youth were selected with whom to conduct a second set of in-depth, follow-up interviews. Semistructured questions were used to expand on the
The in-depth interviews were conducted in 1994. This article reports on the findings from the in-depth interviews.

To ensure the safety of girlfriends without escalating abusive behavior, interviews were only conducted with those youth who consented to phone contact with their current or ex-girlfriends. Objectives for doing this included: supporting safety planning, explaining legal rights, offering referrals to local services for abused females, and explaining the research. Verification of accounts of abusive behavior was not attempted because this may have put girlfriends at further risk of assault (Adams 1988; Hart 1992). Disclosures of abusive behavior were confronted at the end of the interview to minimize data contamination. Failure to label this behavior as abusive and make men accountable can be interpreted as tacit approval for this behavior (Ptacek 1988).

The safety of girlfriends from life-threatening harm (e.g., death threats, physical and sexual assaults involving knives or guns, serious injuries resulting from assaults) was ensured by informing participants of the obligation to report any such acts immediately to the police, probation officer, and/or Children’s Aid Society (CAS) worker. Although this procedure probably inhibited disclosures regarding abuse perpetration, it prioritized the safety of victims. Eight boys described incidents classified as life-threatening assaults; appropriate professionals were thus contacted.

Child abuse and suicidal behavior also prevented maintenance of participants’ complete anonymity. Ontario’s child welfare legislation, the 1984 Child and Family Services Act (CFSA), stipulates that any professional having suspicion of child abuse or neglect of a young person younger than sixteen years must report these suspicions to the CAS. Twenty-four boys reported having been beaten by father figures before their sixteenth birthday. All boys were also informed that the identity of anyone at high risk of attempting suicide could not be kept confidential to ensure their safety.

**DEFINITIONS**

*Girlfriend.* Girlfriend was defined as any current and past short-term (including one-night stands) and longer term sexual relationships with females aged thirteen to seventeen years. Brief sexual relationships and steady, intimate relationships were included. Relationships not involving sexual intimacy were excluded. *Sexual intimacy* included sexual touching, intercourse (oral, anal, and vaginal), and penetration by other objects.

*Abuse.* Only those incidents of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse that occurred since the participants’ thirteenth birthday were studied. A modified version of Straus and Gelles’s (1986) Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS) was used.
to measure physical and emotional abuse. The CTS is based on a family conflict model, made up of eighteen items to measure methods of dealing with interpersonal conflict in family relationships. The items are placed on a continuum ranging from verbal reasoning (from discussing the issue calmly to requesting the assistance of a third party to facilitate problem resolution) to verbal aggression (from insulting and swearing to throwing, smashing, hitting, or kicking something) and physical aggression (throwing something at to using a knife or gun on another person). These scales have been widely used and are found to be reliable and have concurrent and construct validity (Straus 1990). However, the CTS has been soundly criticized for its shortcomings (Dobash et al. 1992; Smith 1987). These problems include categorizing abuse on a continuum of severity (thereby assuming that minor violence and emotional abuse are not as serious as severe violence), and ignoring the context, meaning, intensity, and consequences of abusive behavior. In response to these criticisms, the CTS was modified for this study.

The criteria used to classify emotional abuse was the presence of “threatened to hit or throw something at her” and/or “threw, smashed, or kicked something” on at least five separate occasions in the relationship in addition to the presence of “put her down in front of friends or family” and/or “accused her of having affairs or flirting with other men” during the majority of time spent together. For “threw, smashed, or kicked something,” only those reported incidents where there was a deliberate attempt to frighten were included. Other acts categorized as emotional abuse (and not included in the modified CTS) included: threatening to use other forms of physical violence (not including hitting or throwing something at them) or threatening murder, stalking and monitoring routine activities, beating up new and old boyfriends in their presence, and threatening to commit suicide if the relationship ended.1 The presence of only one of these items was required to be categorized as emotional abuse, given that the intent was to threaten physical violence (defined as assault in the Canadian Criminal Code), control, and/or repeatedly humiliate girlfriends. Most boys reported engaging in these activities many times.

The criteria used to classify physical abuse was the presence of a minimum of five separate incidents of minor violence (throwing objects at them, pushing, grabbing, shoving, and 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). These behaviors could be classified as either common assault (Section 265), aggravated assault (Section 268), assault with a weapon, or assault causing bodily harm (Section 267) in the Criminal Code of Canada.

A modification of Koss et al.’s (1987) Sexual Experiences Survey (SES) was used to assess sexually abusive behaviors. The SES is a valid and reliable measure and has been extensively used in North America (Koss and Gidycz 1985). In the original scale, the eight items are subdivided into four types of
behavior: unwanted sexual contact, sexual coercion, attempted rape, and rape. The categorization of sexually abusive behavior against girlfriends was limited to the following: sexual touching subsequent to the use of threats of physical force or actual physical force; and oral, anal, or vaginal penetration against consent through the use of force, threat of physical violence, or intentional incapacitation. Therefore, only those behaviors defined in the Canadian Criminal Code as sexual assault (Section 271), aggravated sexual assault (Section 273), or sexual assault with a weapon or causing bodily harm (Section 272) were included in the definition of sexual abuse.

Familial patriarchal beliefs/approval of violence against girlfriends. Participants were categorized as adhering to patriarchal beliefs if they agreed with one or more of the following statements:

- A man has the right to decide whether his wife/girlfriend should go out in the evening with her friends.
- A man has the right to decide whether his wife/girlfriend should work outside the home.
- Sometimes it is important for a man to show his wife/girlfriend that he is the head of the house.
- A man has the right to have sex with his wife/girlfriend when he wants, even though she may not want to.

Participants were categorized as approving of violence against girlfriends if they agreed with a man slapping his girlfriend in one or more of the following situations:

- She won’t do what he tells her to do.
- She insults him when they are home alone.
- She insults him in public.
- She comes home drunk.
- She is sobbing hysterically.
- She won’t have sex with him.
- He learns that she is dating another male.

Masculinity. To identify masculine identities, boys were asked the following questions: What is the ideal man? What does it mean to you—to be male? and Do you think this has anything to do with the way you get along with women, gays, and other guys? A common pattern of masculine ideals, values, and anxieties was reported, previously identified by Connell (1991) as protest and negative identities in marginal male youth. A protest masculine identity is characterized by a public, objective display of power over gays, women, and other men. The traditional male role is pursued to extremes; abusive behavior, toughness, competitiveness, and dominance are common traits. On the other hand, individuals with negative masculine identities prac-
tice behavior contrary to that of the dominant masculine identities. This identity is characteristic of gays, bisexuals, and other sexual minorities. These people engage in individual actions that directly negate and oppose traditional forms of masculinity.

CHARACTERISTICS OF IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW SAMPLE

The average age was 15.6 years, with a range of 14 to 17 years. All thirty participants were abusive. Twelve were in a current relationship with a girlfriend. None was or had ever participated in counseling for abusive behavior. All were defined as economically and socially marginal for a number of reasons. They had poor relations with their families and received little or no financial support from them. Twenty-four were beaten by fathers and witnessed beatings of their mothers by fathers. Sixteen were living away from home: nine lived in a rooming house, shelter, or on the street; five in a young offender or group home; and two were in a rented house or apartment. Parental control was minimal (the fourteen who lived at home spent very little time there). Almost all were from working-class neighborhoods or low-income housing projects. The mean school grade completed was 8.3, with a range of 6 to 10. Many had dropped out of school, and those still registered in school were either failing or frequently absent.

There were significant intragroup differences. Twenty-five identified as heterosexual, one as bisexual, three had serious questions about their sexual orientation, and one said he was gay. Six were ethnoracial minorities. Seventeen were gang members, and almost all reported engaging in criminal activity and substance use on most days. They varied somewhat in the extent and forms of abuse inflicted, and their reasons for being abusive. As well, most reported participation in collective beatings on gays, ethnoracial minorities, and men they considered to be woman abusers.

DATA ANALYSIS

The method used for analyzing the data is based on the techniques of ethnographic data analysis (Glaser and Straus 1967). Data for the interviews consist of detailed, handwritten recordings regarding how these youth described their abusive behavior, made during and immediately following each interview. The narratives were therefore recorded as close to verbatim as possible, and organized into meaningful patterns around the conceptual categories tested in the screening interviews. An attempt was made “to document the world from the point of view of the people studied” (Hammersley 1992, 165), but the accounts could not simply be taken at face value. It was expected
that the participants would rationalize, legitimize, and minimize their behavior (Scully 1990). Truth status (Silverman 1993) is an important issue. Twenty-nine of the accounts have similar patterns, replete with internal inconsistencies. The participants used “socially approved vocabularies” (Scott and Lyman 1968, 46, 52) in which they justified their abusive behaviors. These boys consistently said that nothing was wrong with their behavior. Their accounts were characterized by elements of boasting, bragging, and machismo; yet despite challenges to and probing of their accounts, there was a high degree of consistency in their narratives.

FINDINGS

Twenty boys were emotionally, physically, and sexually abusive; four were emotionally and sexually abusive; and six were emotionally and physically abusive. Of the twenty-six physical abusers, fourteen engaged in minor forms of physical abuse and twelve reported having used one or more acts of severe violence. In only one case was there only one act of minor violence. Instead, participants reported patterns of physical abuse that were ongoing and paired with other types of abuse. Of the twenty-four sexual abusers, twelve reported acts of unwanted sexual contact, and twelve reported acts of forced intercourse. All boys who reported acts of forced intercourse also forced many acts of sexual contact.

The account of Steve, a fifteen-year-old Lebanese youth in ninth grade, is illustrative of the types of abusive behavior and rigid patriarchal-authoritarian beliefs held by most of the other participants. Girls “pissed him off,” made him “look stupid,” and “didn’t know their place in society.” He said they all liked to be hit, and that he was not abusive. Steve was Muslim, and went to school regularly. He lived at home with his biological family, and said family life was harmonious. The process through which Steve became abusive was much different than the majority of the other youth in the sample. Steve contextualized his patriarchal-authoritarian views in his religion and his male peer group. He spent much of his time at home with other male family members (for the most part in religious activities that excluded women).

One time at school I slammed her against a locker. I choked her until she was red. She was making me look stupid with lies and shit. . . . Last year I shoved a girl into a snow bank. There was a big block of ice in it. I rammed her in. I wanted to hurt her. . . . She always was wanting me to hit her. It was noth’in’. I never even laid a hand on her. [Long silence.] . . . She turns red when she knows she’s wrong—kind of like being embarrassed. [Blushing.] I wouldn’ta done anything if she hadn’t made me look so stupid. What she said was all lies. She made me look like a goof in front of my friends.
Steve’s account is riddled with inconsistencies. Under what circumstances could Steve present his violence to be nonabusive? Steve knew the assault on his ex-girlfriend was socially unacceptable because he got caught by the school administration (a fact later disclosed). However, he denied wrongdoing by justifying his actions. He denied that she suffered any injuries as a result of the choking, attributing the redness of her face to having been embarrassed.

Juvenile delinquents employ techniques of neutralization that allow them to carry on with their lives while engaging in deviant behavior (Sykes and Matza 1957). Likewise, these young abusers did not identify their behavior as being wrong. Instead, they portrayed their values and actions to be on a superior moral plane. Their accounts are characterized by the use of a vocabulary of adjustment (Kanin 1967), in which their socially unacceptable behavior was denied through the sophisticated use of justifications. Justifications are the denial of wrongdoing (Ptacek 1988). Denial characterizes all but one account; twenty-nine reported their behavior as nonabusive and justifiable for two reasons. First, any injury suffered or pain inflicted on their girlfriends was denied. They neutralized any suffering caused by their beatings, forced sexual intercourse, and threats of violence. Second, their girlfriends failed to fulfill the obligations of what many referred to as the “good bitch.” These boys symbolized their behavior as righteous and in defense of a higher moral order. Steve’s account is illustrative. He considered it to be a direct affront to his own masculinity that girls did not keep within their traditional gender roles:

It’s all about knowing your place in society. . . . It really pisses me off when I see a girl who pretends that she doesn’t have to be in her place. I feel like I have to teach her a lesson. How the fuck are girls ever gonna know that their job is to take care of shit at home—cooking, cleaning, the kids—if we don’t tell them? I mean, it’s me who’s supposed to be making the big bucks to support my family. Where the fuck do girls get off thinking that they can do it too? . . . I’ve never agreed with hitting a girl and I never will. . . . I think I’m doing them a favor. The bottom line is that men are more important. . . . I’ve got my place in the world and I know women do too.

All boys reported individual and collective acts of violence against women (seventeen were gang members, thirteen belonged to male peer groups), and most had engaged in other severe, collective acts of violence (eight had beaten gays, eighteen had beat up men they perceived to be woman abusers, and twenty beat up ethnoracial minorities). The account of Marty, a sixteen-year-old ex-racist skinhead, is representative:

At the time, it was a high. A power high. It was a feeling of being king shit—no one could touch you. It was like niggers were to blame for everything. . . . They were the reason we had no money, no jobs, no decent place to live. Being a part
of the Front [Heritage Front] gave us a sense of belonging . . . . They told us we had an important job to do . . . . I think I was part of it because it made me feel good as a guy—respected. I had status . . . . Kicking the living shit out of anything that wasn’t like me . . . . It’s sad, really. Most of the guys into it were losers—stupid, no money, no place to stay, addicts . . . . It’s all about fear and status . . . . I felt like shit, a loser.

Twenty-one boys agreed with one or more familial patriarchal beliefs, and eleven agreed with slapping a girlfriend in one or more of the situations previously described. Eight boys had at least one patriarchal belief and supported the use of violence against girlfriends, whereas seven had neither patriarchal beliefs nor supported the use of violence. Comparing these two groups of boys (the Believers and Nonbelievers) sheds light on the various processes involved in becoming abusers. The Believers were much more likely than the Nonbelievers to have been physical/sexual/emotional abusers, have used severe violence, have an abusive family, and have received family support to abuse (explicit instructions from father figures to abuse women in particular situations). Patriarchal and pro-abuse beliefs are thus linked to the most serious types of abuse, and instructions from fathers to abuse, combined with experiencing abuse at home, are related to adherence to these beliefs and abusive behavior (Totten 2000).

Although the development of patriarchal ideas about family and gender was not identical, there were common themes. Five specific assumptions of familial and gender ideologies were evident in many of the accounts.

1. The sexual division of labor is natural: women are natural child rearers and homemakers, and men are natural breadwinners.
2. Rigid gender roles: in general, women should be obedient to, respectful of, and dependent on men. Female intimates should be sexually accessible, loyal, and faithful to their male partners.
3. Sexual objectification and homophobia: women are sexual objects to be conquered by men. Heterosexuality is natural and moral, and all other sexual orientations are immoral and therefore punishable.
4. Law and order: abusive behavior is justifiable and an appropriate way for biological fathers and boyfriends to resolve conflict and maintain traditional gender roles.
5. “Balls and Fists”: in the absence of a good job and material possessions, it is down to the basics for men.

Where did these beliefs come from? Twenty-six boys were beaten by father figures and witnessed beatings of their mothers during childhood. Twenty-seven reported that their caregivers adhered to rigid, traditional gender roles. These experiences were related to their rigid ideological assumptions about family and gender. Nick, a seventeen-year-old Francophone street youth and gang member, said that his father tried to kill him when he disclosed that he might be gay. Following this brutal assault at the age of eleven or twelve years, Nick’s father and uncle gave him money every week
to use prostitutes to “fix” his sexual attraction to men. This happened despite the involvement of child welfare authorities.

I was about eleven or twelve. I thought I was going crazy. So I asked my fucking Dad. He was some pissed. He kicked the living shit outta me. He threw me through some drywall. He was screaming at me, “No son of mine’s gonna be a fuckin’ queer!” Then he put his hands around my throat and held me up against the wall and screamed in my face, “Don’t you ever, ever tell anyone what you just said to me. From now on, it’s my rules. You’re gonna get fucked every night by a cunt even if it costs me a million dollars.” And that’s when I started using hos.

Nick denied that his biological father’s actions were wrong. He indicated that his father’s violence was a legitimate attempt to cure him of his homosexual desires, saying later that most fathers get their sons to use prostitutes around the age of twelve years. When asked if he was still sexually attracted to other males, he said, “Kind of. But it’s not worth it. I think I’ve got it under control now. . . . As long as I’m fucking hos—those little cunts—pretty often, and I’m fighting a lot, I don’t really think of being attracted to another guy.” Nick’s father and uncle were members of a motorcycle gang. He described routinely seeing women led around the house on spiked dog chains by male family members, and that his uncle was in jail for murdering a woman. Nick, like most of the other youth, neutralized the conflicts in his life. Despite having been brutally abused and witnessing woman abuse at home, he justified his own sexual violence against prostitutes (Nick reported that he routinely used violence during sex with these women). Despite having homosexual desires, Nick routinely beat up gays on the street with his gang.

Like Nick, the majority of the boys who witnessed their biological fathers abuse their mothers (eleven out of twelve) reported these assaults as justifiable and caused by their mothers. By contrast, the majority (ten out of twelve) of the boys who saw their mothers being abused by social fathers (stepfathers, boyfriends) presented these assaults as wrong. Elevated status was awarded to their biological, as opposed to social, fathers. In most of these cases, biological fathers represented the natural patriarchs of families, even if they were not present during the childhood of many of the participants. Biological fathers were the natural breadwinners and their abusive behavior was a justifiable way to resolve conflict and keep their wives and children in line. Social fathers, for the most part, were not awarded this same privilege of using physical force to maintain traditional gender roles by the participants.

Almost all of these youth reported that the traditional sexual division of labor and the adherence to rigid gender roles in their homes were natural. Almost all reported that they came from homes in which the sexual objectification of women and homophobia were commonplace. Finally, almost all reported that the abusive behavior of their biological fathers was justifiable and an appropriate way to resolve conflict and ensure the
appropriate behavior of other family members. For most of these youth, the existence of these various ideological assumptions resulted in a consistent way of seeing their world; a world in which their childhood experiences of abuse made sense within the context of rigid gender roles and related behaviors.

Views of the ideal man (physically tough and strong, wealthy, a breadwinner, heterosexual and sexually active, and in control of life and women) for twenty-eight boys were interwoven with their familial ideals (the sexual division of labor is natural, and abusive behavior is justifiable for biological fathers). Colin, a sixteen-year-old Francophone street youth, spoke about how the “ideal man” provides for his family, and is clearly the boss at home:

Well, he’s gotta have a family, a wife and kids. . . . Especially if he’s got no job. Now a good job or even any kind of job, is real important. Now if a man’s got no job, he would still have his family. . . . And his wife and kids . . . would have to respect him and listen to him. [Silence.] A house and a car are also important. It’s kind of like showing you’re a man, I guess. They’re proof that a guy’s successful. . . . And I guess a man’s gotta be tough. He’s gotta take care of himself and look out for his family. If a man can’t do that, he’s nothin’. 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.

Colin never had the material wealth he associated with the ideal man. In Colin’s view, gaining the respect of one’s wife and children appears to be based on getting them to obey. A man can “get by without the rest” (being the material provider) if he is physically tough and can control his family. Like many of the other youth, Colin’s ideological assumptions about family and gender were inseparable; for example, being heterosexual and using physical force can compensate for a man not having a job. Ideal masculine identity was directly linked to familial patriarchal ideology. The family was a critical site of ideological development and influence for these boys.

Twenty-nine boys said that they were like the ideal man, with one exception: they had no material possessions, job, and questioned their chances of being a breadwinner. They described themselves as powerful fighters, womanizers, gang members, and protectors of women. They made it clear that they were not “faggots,” “bitches,” “wimps,” “woman-beaters,” or “rapists.” When asked about whether they could achieve the material wealth, good jobs, and breadwinner status of the ideal man, two participants reported that they would, and the remaining accounts were filled with despair and hopelessness. These boys said that they would have no job or a “shit job,” would be dependent on crime or welfare for money, and would have few material possessions. However, they were adamant that they would still be the breadwinner. The account of Jim, a fifteen-year-old skateboarder in a young offender facility, is illustrative:
I’ve got nothing, I mean as a guy. If you take away the fucking, girls, and fighting I’ve got sweet fuck all. I wasn’t born with a silver spoon in my mouth. . . . So now it really pisses me when I see some rich motherfucker my age driving around in a fast car with lots of gold. ‘Cause I know that’ll never be me. I’ll never have any of that shit from a real job—like a lawyer or a doctor. If I get a job it’ll be picking up garbage or flipping burgers. Well, excuse me. I think I’ll steal cars and deal. But guys like me figure we’re real men compared to those rich son-of-a-bitches. We gotta fight and live on the edge to get our cash. Them, those faggots go off to some pukey university and come out millionaires. Not me. . . . You gotta have more balls to make it rich my way.

Jim was a physical/sexual/emotional abuser, who had fired a gun at his girlfriend. Like many of the other young men in this study, he neutralized the fact that he had “nothing . . . as a guy” without the “fucking, girls, and fighting.” If you were rich, according to Jim, you could not be a man. Despite his bravado, his feelings of inadequacy and frustration regarding his lack of economic opportunity are apparent. Like twenty-seven of the other boys, Jim clearly recognized that he had no economic future in the traditional sense. Accordingly, he negated anything masculine about employment, material possessions, and wealth.

Notwithstanding this neutralization and negation of male privilege attained through traditional means, almost all said that they would nevertheless achieve male superiority through the only other means available to them: “balls and fighting.” Their male gender was inseparable from being the breadwinner: almost all reported that they had to support their wives and children in the future. Failure to do so would be disastrous for their manhood. In the absence of a good job, breadwinner status could still be attained through sex, physical toughness, and the protection of families from harm.

One of the most striking inconsistencies in the accounts appeared when these youth talked about the rapes and beatings of women other men apparently committed. As if on a superior moral plane, eighteen participants spoke of their groups/gangs being on a mission to rid their community of violent rapists and woman beaters. Don said, “We’re into kicking the shit outta guys who rape and beat girls. We track them down. . . . That’s the worst. A guy cannot hit a girl.” When asked why he felt it important that people know this, he said, “I guess I’m proving something. . . . That I’m a guy. . . . I’m beating up other guys for exactly what I’m doing. I guess I’m lying about it—covering up my own shit. . . . If I show other people I’m against abusive guys . . . they respect me for it.”

With the exception of the gay participant, all of these boys spoke about having to continually prove their heterosexuality to their male peers (including the one bisexual and three youth who were questioning their sexual orientation), and many expressed anxieties about their sexuality. Many defined themselves through their heterosexuality and their apparently insatiable appetite for frequent sexual activity. Almost all spoke of their penises as key
attributes of their personas, and many reported beating up anything with effeminate features. A man with any hint of femininity posed a direct threat to their own masculinity. Bob, an Afro-American sixteen-year-old ward of the CAS, broke down when telling me about his sexual anxieties: “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.... Well, what’s the point to life if you’re a faggot? You would be nothing.... Well, it’s not so bad if you’ve got a girlfriend. I mean, you can handle not having too much money and shit.”

A physical/sexual/emotional abuser, Bob reported acts categorized as severe violence and forced intercourse. “Fucking” girlfriends compensated for lack of material possessions and serious questions about his sexual orientation. The processes through which Bob learned his abusive behavior differed significantly from those of the other boys. He did not rigidly embrace a patriarchal-authoritarian ideology. Victimized by racial violence, he had spent the majority of his adolescence in male CAS group homes (his mother could not protect him from beatings by her boyfriends). These experiences were part of the different process through which he learned to abuse. Compared to the majority of the sample, Bob had relatively little structural space (Messerschmidt 1997) in which to define, develop, and negotiate his masculinity.

In the context of social and economic marginalization, these boys proved manhood in the presence of what they were not: “bitches” (girlfriends) or “faggots.” The presence of material possessions was not enough to demonstrate masculinity. Instead, masculinity was a much more precarious, malleable trait, needing to be negotiated and created daily. Their conception of masculinity was defined by the social situations in which they found themselves. Within the context of male peers, perceived threat to masculinity was at its highest. This explains the great emphasis that many of these youth placed on gay bashing, despite the fact that three bashers had serious questions about their own sexual orientation and one was bisexual.

Seventeen-year-old Paul, who was gay, and Steve expected to gain adequately paying jobs in the future. How could it be that these two youth were so very different than the rest of the sample on this issue? Paul was one of only two youth who worked. He had also grown up in a middle-class adoptive family; his father was a manager in a high-profile police force. Unlike the majority of the other boys, his father worked full-time. Paul’s aspirations about his own working life appear to be directly related to having had a caregiver who worked. Steve, on the other hand, was adamant that his biological father was the boss of his family because he “worked” two weeks of the year, whereas his mother never “worked” despite having a full-time home daycare business. His father was the breadwinner, so he was the head of the family. Unemployment and any other deviance from traditional gender and familial roles posed
a direct threat to Steve’s masculinity. It was unbearable to think about a future wherein his economic prospects were marginal.

Most of these boys presented a common pattern of values and beliefs consistent with a rigid, protest definition of masculinity. It was evident in twenty-eight abusers who reported that the ideal man needs to be tough, aggressive, muscular, heterosexual, and have lots of money; they agreed with at least one of the patriarchal beliefs and/or approved of a man slapping his girlfriend in at least one of the situations noted previously.

One youth self-identified as gay, one self-identified as bisexual, and three youth said that they were questioning their sexual orientation. Two boys were defined as having “negative” masculinities: Paul (who was gay) and Sylvain (who was questioning his sexual orientation). They reported that the ideal man needs to be sensitive, caring, educated, have a good job, not be abusive, and not need lots of money and material possessions to gain status. Both said they had chosen a sexual orientation different than their fathers’ to escape the cycle of abuse. There were large differences between these two and the other twenty-eight boys. Neither reported adhering to familial patriarchal beliefs or had attitudes supporting physical girlfriend abuse. Neither had engaged in severe violence or forced sexual intercourse with girlfriends. Neither belonged to gangs, and both were working part-time during the study. However, Sylvain said that he needed to be tough and protect himself. He was one of the eight participants who reported having bashed gays.

Variation within the sample is revealed in the comparison of the eight gay bashers with the twenty-two other boys. Fourteen-year-old Phil was typical: “We fuckin’ roll faggots for a laugh. Sometimes they have money, sometimes a jacket. Goddam queers. They’re not men. Bitches. No, they’re worse than bitches. . . . What the fuck do they have balls for, to ram each other up the ass?” Bashers were most likely to have used severe physical violence against girlfriends, and adhere most strongly to patriarchal-authoritarian models of family and gender. As well, they were most likely to have experienced abuse at home, and to have been told by fathers to abuse women. Bashers were more than four times as likely than nonbashers to be gay, bisexual, or have serious questions about their sexual orientation. Negotiating masculinity in gangs is difficult for sexual minority male youth. Many of the bashers were gang members and had not disclosed their sexual orientation to anybody. Any such disclosure would have resulted in victimization by severe violence.

The dynamic of reaction formation (Cohen 1955) characterizes the bashers and those who beat up rapists and woman abusers. These boys suspected that they were like the rapists, woman beaters, and gays they claimed to be beating. They tried to convince themselves and others that they were exactly the opposite. Terrified and depicting their lives as worthless, they continually looked over their backs, saying that they had to protect themselves from the outside world. Masculine identity was reaffirmed and expressed through overt domination. Many learned how to protect their self-image by picking
on the less powerful, while at the same time displaying a public disdain for these individuals whom they so closely resembled. To construct who and what they were, these boys had to publicly define what they were not.

Paul did not use a vocabulary of adjustment in his account, and was the only sexual minority comfortable with his orientation. The remaining four youth (one bisexual, three questioning their orientation) seemed to be confused, and were somewhat afraid of their orientation. One of the ways that they dealt with this confusion and fear was to participate in a collective, public beating of someone whom they closely resembled. Unlike the other boys, Paul did not use justifications to deny that he had been sexually and emotionally abusive with an ex-girlfriend. Instead, he admitted that he had behaved in this way to gain approval from his peers (he was not “out” about his sexual orientation when he abused his girlfriend). He demonstrated insight into his actions, linking them to his father’s abusiveness and peer pressure. He accepted full responsibility for his abusiveness.

DISCUSSION

Almost all boys were socialized into a role of dominance, aggression, and power, yet were unlikely to ever wield this power outside of peer and family relationships. Their access to the institutional benefits of patriarchy had been blocked. They had only minimal access to the traditional resources associated with male dominance and authority; and only a limited variety of resources at hand to practice their gender. How did they make sense of their situations? For most, their lives were characterized by varying degrees of adherence to the traditional male attributes of toughness, competitiveness, and dominance. Findings support other research in this area (Connell 1991; Klein 1982; Messerschmidt 1993; Rubin 1976). The abuse of girlfriends and other persons perceived to be weaker compensated for and masked the perceived threat to their masculine identities. The construction of masculinity was an ongoing process for these boys, and abusive behavior was an aspect of their identity construction, expression, and reaffirmation. Violence was one of the few resources over which they had control.

Masculine identities were interwoven with and products of their familial and gender ideologies. Similar familial and gender beliefs were developed in early childhood. Defining their world from this viewpoint, they did not present their abusive behavior as incongruous. Engaging in behavior that in most contexts would be defined as criminal, they indicated that their actions were moral and righteous. They were acting according to their values and those of their peers and families. They had learned how to protect their own self-image and overcome challenges to their masculine identities by picking on the less powerful. They were also attempting to protect themselves. Many of the narratives are characterized by a theme of constantly having to defend...
oneself. The way in which they defined their masculine identities suggests a constant need for reinforcement and self-affirmation.

This was not a homogeneous group of adolescents. One-third of these boys said that they beat up racial and sexual minorities, despite being minorities themselves. They did not verbalize any inconsistency in these actions. These ten youth likely developed their racist, sexist, and homophobic attitudes and beliefs through a different process than did the twenty heterosexual, white participants. They did not all embrace the same concept of masculinity. One gay and one bisexual youth demonstrated negative masculine types, whereas the rest exhibited behavior characteristic of a protest masculine type. Their masculine identities were the outcome of at least two complex processes: passive gender role socialization, and active negotiation and resistance.

These differences account for variations in the extent to which they embraced familial and gender ideologies. In turn, this differential adherence to patriarchal-authoritarian beliefs and attitudes explains the variation in the extent of abuse inflicted on girlfriends, sexual minorities, and ethno-racial minorities. Their development of patriarchal ideas about family and gender was not identical; some did not report adhering to any of these beliefs and attitudes, and others developed these assumptions through different processes.

The findings illustrate the interactive effects of rigid familial and gender ideologies on masculine identity. An example of how familial patriarchal ideology penetrates marginal male youth culture is provided. The linkage between poverty and abuse is qualified by focusing on familial and gender ideologies. Men who rigidly adhere to a patriarchal-authoritarian model of family and gender (as indicated by gay bashing and adherence to familial patriarchal beliefs and attitudes supporting physical girlfriend abuse) may be the most likely to use physical and sexual violence to keep women in line and to use physical violence on ethnoracial and sexual minorities. In the present study, these boys were most likely to use the most severe types of violence, and to use all three forms of abuse against their girlfriends (physical, sexual, and emotional). They were also most likely to have grown up with social fathers and to have experienced serious abuse at home. Sexual minorities, although more likely to be gay bashers, were most likely to use less severe physical and sexual abuse against girlfriends (minor violence and forced sexual contact) compared to the heterosexual boys.

This does not mean that more affluent men are not abusive. Clearly, some of these individuals are (Rodgers 1994; DeKeseredy and Schwartz 1998). Men with more resources can commit different, less visible forms of abuse, and may choose to direct this behavior at different individuals (Messerschmidt 1993). For example, chronic psychological violence has been found to be more prevalent among men with graduate degrees, and
physical violence relatively low among men with university degrees (Lupri, Grandin, and Brinkerhoff 1994).

Further research is necessary on a number of issues. Qualitative study is required on groups of marginal nonabusers and nonmarginal abusers. This would permit further exploration on the relationship between marginalization and violence, and the exploration of why most marginalized youth are not abusive. As well, more research is required on younger boys regarding the development of patriarchal-authoritarian beliefs. Although it is only a minority of these boys who become abusive, the development of this belief system seems to begin at an early age.

There are a number of social policy and practice implications arising from this study. First, male youth at risk of becoming abusive can be identified at an early age, using some of the risk-markers discussed in this article. Early identification, monitoring, and intervention with these boys can stop violent behavior and positively influence the development of masculine identities nonconducive to violent behavior (Salisbury and Jackson 1995). School teachers and parents can play key roles here. Violence prevention programs, when integrated into the core curriculum of primary and secondary schools for all students, can be successful in decreasing school-based violence and referring high-risk students to more intensive services outside of the school (Wolfe et al. 1995, 1997; Sudermann and Jaffe 1997). When all students are required to participate, stigmatization due to being identified as abusers or victims does not happen. Successful antiviolence, homophobia, sexism, and racism education programs begin in the elementary school grades, a time crucial to the development of healthy gender identity. Early intervention with at-risk children addresses another fundamental problem with marginal youth: poor school attendance. High absenteeism rates of these boys in secondary school could be prevented with such programs. One of the most important predictors of a healthy transition from adolescence into adulthood is staying in school (Ballantyne and Raymond 1998).

Second, comprehensive family support programs, including child abuse and wife abuse prevention initiatives, must be developed. There is a strong link between abuse victimization and perpetration in men. Children who grow up in healthy environments have a better chance to develop into healthy adolescents and to make a smooth transition into adulthood. The boys in this study never experienced the warmth and love of caring familial relationships. At a young age, their identities developed in a context of self-preservation and protection. Abusive behavior is learned in part through parental modeling. Unless parents teach their children well, children will learn that solving problems through force is a legitimate means to get what they desire. Fundamental changes are required in the way we raise our children and respond to situations of child abuse and neglect, and wife assault (Totten 2000). An effective system for identifying, supporting, and monitoring parents at high risk for abusing or neglecting their children has been implemented in some
communities in the United States using community child protection strategies, resulting in a significantly lower incidence of child abuse and neglect (Mulroy 1997).

The main agents of socialization failed to instill values of self-respect and esteem, equality, compassion, and skills for violence-free relationships in the participants. They were taught to glorify violence and define their identities through this behavior. There was minimal exposure to alternative, healthy adult role models. Mentoring programs for these types of boys can counteract the negative effects of violent role models (Askew and Ross 1988; Creighton and Kivel 1992; Wolfe et al. 1995). High-risk children and youth can make a successful transition into adulthood with the support of such programs (Rutter 1990; Pepler, Catallo, and Moore 2000; Totten 2001). These interventions give a strong message that there is more than one way to be a man (Salisbury and Jackson 1995; Pollack 1998).

Finally, marginal people must be supported in finding a viable future. It seems that poverty and hopelessness about future in the labor market are related to abusive behavior through their threats to masculine identity (Totten 2000). Living in poverty results in an increased likelihood of experiencing significant health and developmental problems, early school dropout, employability barriers, intervention by child welfare and youth justice systems, and homelessness (Gonzales-Ramos 1996; Offord, Boyle, and Racine 1990; Wallace, Wallace, and Andrews 1997). The boys in this study were struggling with these issues, and a poverty of masculinity defined their identities. A sense of social and academic failure, rooted in their violent and impoverished home lives and dismal experiences at school, led many to search out acceptance in antisocial peer groups and gangs. Strong, meaningful bonds with family and teachers were not present to counteract these negative peer associations.

Being the breadwinner is a central characteristic of masculinity. Boys in this study went to extremes to compensate for their inability to achieve this traditional breadwinner status. Youth employment strategies, coordinated at local, regional, and national levels, can partially address this issue. Meaningful and adequately paying jobs for all youth, and effective employment and educational programs for marginal youth, are necessary. These programs can influence masculine identity in a healthy way. Through employment, marginal men have the opportunity to achieve those masculine ideals they so desperately want. When meaningful career options are given to powerless young men, they will gain power through having a sense of control over their own destiny. Employment, instead of abusive behavior, can become central in constituting their masculine identity. Through the process of realizing their own potential, positive feelings of self-worth can emerge. Given the opportunity to make a contribution to their community and have these contributions valued instills a sense of belonging. Youth must be given concrete proof that
there is reason to be hopeful about their futures. Feelings of hopelessness and humiliation can contribute to abusive behavior (Totten 2000).

This study has provided a unique exploration of how marginalized boys construct their masculinity through violence. A significant gap in the literature has been addressed by studying a population where the incidence of physical violence is regarded by many to be significant. The generalizability of findings is limited to other populations of marginal male youth in large urban settings. A central risk marker for abusive behavior is degree of adherence to patriarchal-authoritarian models of family and gender. Masculinity type is thus a key predictor of youth violence. Economic and social marginalization, through their threats to masculine identity, can be contributing factors to abusive behavior in some men.

NOTES

1. Uttering threats of physical violence and death are contrary to Section 264 of the Criminal Code of Canada.
2. These questions are based on modified versions of Smith’s (1990) Patriarchal Beliefs and Approval of Violence Against Wives scales.
3. This question was first used by Scully (1990).

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Mark Totten is director of research at the Youth Services Bureau in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, and has more than fifteen years experience working with violent youth. He received his master’s in social work in 1986 and his Ph.D. in sociology in 1996, both from Carleton University, where he has taught child welfare and youth justice courses. He is currently leading a major young offender Restorative Justice project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada in Ottawa, and is coinvestigator of Canada’s first national qualitative study on youth homicide. He has written two books (both published by Broadview Press): Guys, Gangs and Girlfriend Abuse and When Children Kill: A Social-Psychological Study of Youth Homicide (with Katharine Kelly).