

GAYS IN THE GANG

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Abstract

This paper reports on the experiences of twenty-five gay, bisexual and transsexual (GBT) youth gang members who engaged in serious street violence. These acts often endangered the lives of others. It is based upon an ethnographic study of how youth gang members aged fourteen - twenty years accounted for their physical, sexual and emotional violence against heterosexual peers, strangers, sexual minorities, and racial minorities.¹ In-depth interviews and participant observation methods were used. A main objective was to understand GBT gang members' use of violence in a heterosexual gang context, from their perspective. There is no existing literature on this topic. The pressure to conform to heterosexism and homophobia, along with repressed homosexuality, are key to understanding the motives behind violence used by gay, bisexual and transsexual youth. The experiences of gay and bisexual young men in homophobic environments

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likely take on significantly different meanings than those of girls who identified as bisexual in correctional settings. Their gangs were not monolithic.

Gender role construction was an ongoing process for these youth, negotiated and developed with limited resources at hand. Their life courses were all very different. Some said that they chose a pathway out of traditional gender roles to separate themselves from the violence of their caregivers. Other participants reported that they always knew that they were gay. Finally, some disclosed that they became aware of their identities in early adolescence.

Rejected by their families in large part due to their sexual orientation or gender identity, they turned to street families and gangs for a sense of belonging and support. However, most indicated that if other heterosexual gang members discovered their sexual orientation or gender identity, they would have been severely beaten or killed.

None were part of gangs where other members identified as GBT. All participated in severe, public beatings of individuals the gangs considered to be gay or sexually abnormal. These GBT youth resorted to constructing hyper masculine or violent feminine identities to protect their safety. Sadly, these youth are among the highest risk of all young people to experience suicide attempts and self-harm, to live on the street, abuse substances, and to have serious conflicts with their families.² This was true for many of the young people in this study. Research, policy and clinical implications are discussed.

Introduction

Brian was a fourteen-year-old member of a gang which routinely beat racial and ethnic minorities and “sexual perverts”. Here is what he had to say about gays:

“We roll 'em all the time. Not for their fuckin' jackets but just because they're fags. You gotta watch out for them. Bend over and they'll ram their cock up your ass. It's fucking disgusting. We always keep an eye out for fuckin' fags. You never know when they'll try to ram you”.

Brian reported that he himself was gay.

In 1984, Anne Campell wrote a seminal work on female involvement in gangs titled *The Girls in the Gang*. Its influence has been significant. The title of this paper is in part a tribute to her pioneering research. The purpose of this study was to explore how violent GBT youth gang members made sense of their behaviour in their heterosexual dominated gangs; to better understand their world from their viewpoint. Through the exploration of the intentions, meanings and motives associated with their extreme homophobic behaviour, I argue that we can better understand sexual and gender minority³ gang violence in a social context of heterosexual gang activities. A series of face-to-face, in-depth interviews were used with each participant to examine the issues of child maltreatment, collective violence, sexual orientation, gender identity, and gang affiliations. Participant observation in shopping malls, schools, on the street, in shelters and drop-in centres was conducted over a period of three years. The focus was on how gender identity and sexual orientation were developed and expressed in the contexts of violent heterosexual families and gangs.⁴

This study was exploratory. The participation of GBT youth in gangs has

been ignored in the literature, most likely because these youth are primarily viewed as victims of bashing, and highly unlikely to participate in violent gangs where their own personal safety is always at risk. A review of the interview questions posed to adolescent gang members in previous studies supports this assumption.⁵

Considerable data exist on collective gay bashing by heterosexual male adolescents;⁶ there is little, if any data on collective lesbian bashing by girls. Likewise, there is a growing body of literature on interpersonal violence in adult same-sex relationships,⁷ and a few studies on violence in intimate same-sex adolescent dating relationships.⁸ There have been a number of recent, high profile murders of gays in the USA, apparently committed by young men who themselves have unresolved issues around sexual orientation. Victims include Larry King, Scott Joe Weaver, Arthur Warren, Billy Jack Gaither, Matthew Shepard, Barry Winchell, and Scott Amedure. Dahir asks “are bashers killing the gay part of themselves when they attack gay men?”⁹

There is a sound body of literature on the high-risk issues faced by many GBT youth. These youth are at elevated risk to experience mental health problems, attempt suicide, live on the street after being kicked out of home by parents who do not accept their sexual orientation or gender identity, engage in criminal activity, be victimized by violence, and be taken into residential care.¹⁰

This study addresses the question of GBT adolescent gang violence by taking a life-course approach¹¹ with participants. Studies have shown that early engagement by heterosexual young people in gangs and serious violence can lead to a criminal lifestyle in adulthood, institutionalization, or homicide.¹² We simply do not know if the same is true for GBT youth involved in gangs. How do these adolescents explain their violent behaviour against other youth who so closely resemble themselves? Why is it that this behaviour occurs in the public context of heterosexual youth gangs? This study is relevant to programs and policy because information concerning motivation, justification and conditions relevant to GBT youth gang violence can inform the content of programs designed to prevent their involvement in these activities. It is also very important because of the life-threatening harm endured by victims of gay bashing. One can only imagine the terrible consequences if a gay member of a gang was to be ‘outed’.

The work of James Messerschmidt on gender, criminality¹³ and life course analysis¹⁴, the symbolic interaction literature on gangs and social role construction,¹⁵ as well as the body of research on homosexuality and self-hatred¹⁶ is very useful for contextualizing the current study. Research is available to inform the current study in the bodies of work on gender/identity construction, hate crimes, street gangs, and risks facing GBT youth.

Psychoanalytic theories suggest that homophobia is a result of repressed same sex urges or a form of latent homosexuality. Latent homosexuality is the term used to denote homosexual arousal which the individual is either unaware of or denies.¹⁷ Psychoanalysts use the concept of repressed or latent homosexuality to explain the emotional malaise and irrational attitudes displayed by some individuals who feel guilty about their erotic interests and struggle to deny and repress homosexual impulses.¹⁸ Gregory Herek (1984) developed a model that distinguishes three types of homophobic attitudes according to the social psychological function they serve: (1) *experiential*, categorizing social reality by one's past interactions with homosexual persons; (2) *defensive*, coping with one's inner

conflicts or anxieties by projecting them onto homosexual persons; and (3) *symbolic*, expressing abstract ideological concepts that are closely linked to one's notion of self and to one's social network and reference groups. Herek (1984: 10) writes:

“It frequently is assumed that feelings of personal threat result in strong negative attitudes toward homosexuality, whereas lack of threat leads to neutral or positive attitudes... prejudiced attitudes serve to reduce tension aroused by unconscious conflicts. Attitudes are likely to serve a defensive function when an individual perceives some analogy between homosexual persons and her or his own unconscious conflicts. Subsequently, that person responds to gay men and lesbians as a way of externalizing inner conflicts and thereby reducing the anxiety associated with them... unconscious conflicts about one's own sexuality or gender identity might be attributed to lesbians and gay men through a process of projection. Such a strategy permits people to externalize the conflicts and to reject their own unacceptable urges by rejecting lesbians and gay men (who symbolize those urges) without consciously recognizing the urges as their own.”

Henry Adams and his colleagues designed a study to investigate whether homophobic men show more sexual arousal to homosexual cues than non-homophobic men, as suggested by psychoanalytic theory. They found that those with the most homophobic attitudes tend to be repressed homosexuals. The hyper-masculinity of gay-bashing was a cover for their own fear of being outed.¹⁹ Along similar lines, Herek and his colleagues administered a measure of internalized homophobia (IHP) to a community sample of lesbians and gay men, along with measures of psychological well-being, outness, and perceptions of community. They found that lesbian's IHP scores were significantly lower than those of men. Internalized homophobia for both groups was associated with less self-disclosure to heterosexual friends and acquaintances and less sense of connection to the gay and lesbian community. Those participants with the highest IHP scores also reported significantly more depressive symptoms and higher levels of demoralization than others, and high-IHP men manifested lower self-esteem than other men.

Anne Campbell (1987, 463-464) writes “Gang girls see themselves as different from their peers. Their association with the gang is a public proclamation of their rejection of the lifestyle which the community expects from them.” Are they ‘one of the guys’, as Jodi Miller argues? Laura Fishman was one of the first researchers to examine lesbian relations among female gang members. Her account of the 1960s Vice Queens of Chicago (the African-American female auxiliary to the male-dominated Vice-Kings), who reported a preference for same-sex intimate relations as an avenue out of chronic sexual violence and forced prostitution by the Vice Kings, is ground breaking. It is likely that girls involved in gangs resist and negotiate their gender roles outside of traditional femininity; the gang provides a social space to do gender differently.

Methods

In the in-depth interviews, some modified scales were replicated, including the conflict tactics scales²⁰ and the sexual experiences survey.²¹ The interviews were relaxed and lengthy, permitting the participants to talk about issues they thought

were relevant in the areas of child maltreatment, gender construction and identity, gang involvement, and violence. These methods have been described elsewhere.²² When permitted by participants, the interviews were audio taped and then transcribed. A minority of these youth did not consent to the interview being recorded on tape, so notes were taken during the interview and then the discussion was recreated as close to verbatim as possible immediately following the interview. This process often took between two – three hours. The average interview time was approximately five hours.²³ Seven interviews took place in drop-in centres or community-based counselling offices, whereas eight occurred in young offender or adult correctional facilities. Interviewing in these latter institutions likely influenced the accounts.

The method used for analyzing the in-depth interview data was based upon the techniques of ethnographic data analysis²⁴. The data consist of rich accounts describing the participants' perspectives on their own violent behaviour. This method gave the participants the opportunity to explore the meaning of their actions. A systematic search for patterns, explanations and meanings in the narrative text was undertaken.

The dialogue in the in-depth interviews was free-flowing. Although attempts were made to maintain the sequence of questions,²⁵ this was not possible in many cases. In all interviews, however, participants' violent behaviour was defined as harmful and they were challenged to accept responsibility for this violence.

Even though the intent was "to document the world from the point of view of the people studied",²⁶ the accounts could not simply be taken at face value. It was expected that there would be inconsistencies, rationalizations, denial, and minimization of violent behaviour.²⁷ "Truth-status"²⁸ was therefore an important feature of accounts. Gresham Sykes and David Matza (1957) suggest that juvenile delinquents employ techniques of neutralization which allow them to carry on with their lives while engaging in deviant behaviour. These young people portray their values and actions to be morally right and superior to those societal values in their mundane, everyday reality. Their accounts are characterized by the use of a vocabulary of adjustment²⁹, in which their socially unacceptable behaviour is denied through the sophisticated use of justifications. Justifications can be defined as the denial of wrongdoing.³⁰

Characteristics of the GBT Gang Members

All of the 25 participants were hard core gang members at the time of the study and had committed extreme acts of violence, including murder, aggravated assault, assault causing bodily harm, sexual assault, armed robbery, home invasion, and hostage-taking. Sixteen were male, eight were female, and one identified as transsexual. Of the sixteen young men, fifteen reported that they were gay and one said he was bisexual. All of the young women identified as bisexual. Four had children, although none had custody of their child. The youth who identified as transsexual was preparing for gender reassignment surgery. Five were Aboriginal, ten were visible or ethnic minorities, and ten were Caucasian. All were economically and socially marginal. They had poor relations with their families and received little or no financial support from them. Almost all were beaten by caregivers, witnessed beatings of their mothers by father-figures, and experienced emotional maltreatment. All of the female participants reported having been

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sexually abused by father-figures or other men in positions of authority, and had been involved in the sex and drug trade on the streets.

None of the participants had lived at home since early adolescence. At the time of the interviews, they were living on the street (eight) or in young offender or adult correctional facilities (twelve). One was in a psychiatric facility, and four were living independently in apartments. All reported having grown up in poverty on Aboriginal reserves, in government subsidized social housing projects, and/or on the streets. Many of these youth had dropped out or been expelled from school in early adolescence. Most upgraded their studies in correctional facilities and/or had returned to alternative school settings in the community. Two had completed high school and three had only finished grade eight. The average age of these youth was seventeen years, with a range of fourteen - twenty years. All participants reported that their main reasons for leaving, being kicked out or taken from home were related to child maltreatment and their sexual orientation or gender identity issues.

Findings

Participants demonstrated through their accounts that their participation in gangs provided them with empowerment and self-definition. Their construction and doing of gang identities was unique from their relations with others outside of the gang context. Their actions can be seen as a means of resisting gender oppression within and outside of gangs. However, the ways in which they developed and expressed their gender were very different. For example, the relationship between bisexual females and their violence is not theoretically similar to the harmful actions of the gay and bisexual males in the study. The various gender strategies employed by some participants are illustrative of these points. The accounts of Phil, Billy, Kristy, Kathy, Amy and Bob³¹ are used in this section to highlight the very different strategies employed by the young people in this study.

Phil was a fourteen year-old first generation Italian who was on probation for assault. He had recently been released from a young offender facility. He was a member of a street gang organized around pimping and gun running. Other gang members were much older than he, ranging in age from 18 – 24 years. They were all male and heterosexual. Phil had grown up in poverty. In the absence of material possessions, masculinity was down to the basics for him - strength and guns:

“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. They haven't got any balls, you know? What the fuck do they have balls for - to ram each other up the ass? Whata laugh when we find one. Fuckin' right. So I'm no faggot. And at least I've got my strength. Nobody can take that away from a guy - even if he's got nothing else. He's still strong and can pound the crap outta anyone. A guy can never lose that. Strength and guns. If you can't beat 'em, shoot 'em.”

When Phil said "at least I've got my strength. Nobody can take that away from a guy", he may have meant that he had nothing left to lose – he identified as gay later on in the interview. Indicating that his masculinity was in jeopardy, he seemed to neutralize

this issue by presenting himself as powerful and invincible. Guns, fists, and gay bashing appeared to compensate for his dark inner secret. Physical strength, guns, and raw power covered up his inner struggles. Phil was likely coping with his own self-loathing by beating up anything resembling himself.

Phil used excuses to explain why the behaviour was bashing, and why he was not in the wrong. He reported that they (the victims) deserve it, because they molest kids and would rape you any chance they got. He said his violence against gay victims was acceptable and justifiable because they failed to fulfil the obligations of compulsory heterosexuality. He symbolized his behaviour as righteous and in defence of a heterosexual moral order. He described victims as failing to abide by “the rules”; he said that gang members felt better when they took their anger out on someone else. He strongly denied any wrongdoing. His account has some similarities to the convicted rapists Scully (1990) categorized as ‘admitters.’

Compare these strategies to those of Billy, a nineteen year-old Lebanese male-to-female transsexual who was attracted to women. Her family came to Canada before her birth. She was on social assistance and was taking hormones in preparation for gender reassignment surgery, and was on medication to control depression, aggression, and paranoia at the time of the study. Billy said that she had witnessed serious violence between her parents as a child, and that her father had inflicted the most injurious violence. She said that both her parents had often been violent with her and had subjected her to humiliating psychological abuse related to her gender identity. She denied ever having been sexually abused.

Billy described rigid gender roles at home, stating that “females should stay home, cook and wear dresses...males should provide for the family, work and be macho.” She said that her family was extremely homophobic. Billy reported that throughout her life, she had been ostracized because of her ethnicity and gender identity by peers. She was a loner, yet occasionally participated in collective beatings of male prostitutes with a local gang. Billy said that she had fooled other members into believing she was a tough, macho male. She reported that she always wore baggy clothes to conceal the development of her breasts.

Billy had perpetrated severe beatings on strangers, physically and sexually assaulted family members, made numerous bomb threats, stalked individuals, and had been convicted of arson. She had been committed to hospitalization under provincial mental health legislation on many occasions because of the risk she posed to herself and others. According to Billy, members in her gang thought she was “psycho”, and apparently only let her in on the occasional activity because they feared her. Billy was extremely homophobic, often bashing victims she perceived to be gay with other gang members. Billy indicated that she felt equal, even superior to the other gang members because of her power: other members thought she was crazy, knew she was capable of extreme violence, and had no idea that she was transsexual. This likely compensated for the mistreatment she lived with on a daily basis outside of gang life. Thus, as Jodi Miller writes, Billy found “protection from gendered vulnerability” in the gang.

Billy used excuses to explain why her bashing was acceptable and justifiable: 1) She denied any injuries or pain inflicted to her victims. She seemed to be able to neutralize any suffering; 2) The failure of her victims to fulfil the obligations of compulsory heterosexuality. She symbolized the gang’s behaviour as righteous and in

defence of a heterosexual moral order. She said that her victims “failed to go by ‘the rules’; and 3) She hated herself. She indicated that her victims were the cause of her suffering, and therefore deserved to be hurt.

Billy reported that the severity of her violence had progressed throughout her life, indicating that some acts were premeditated, others spontaneous. She said premeditation only involved planning how she herself could escape uninjured. Her sexual and physical violence was at times committed individually, at other times in a gang context. On different occasions in the interview, Billy said that she felt “good”, “respected”, and occasionally had feelings of remorse during and after the violence.

Billy wanted to undergo gender reassignment because “women could get away with more criminal activity, as society does not think they are dangerous”. She expressed regret at not having been born female; she thought that she could have gotten away with more violence if this had been the case. She said that if she had female sex parts, she could gay bash more often. She said “it is okay to hurt someone as much as they hurt you”, referring to the many times she had been victimized by peers because of gender identity issues. She said she was “under threat”, and that it is “good to intimidate people so they are afraid of me”. She strongly denied any wrongdoing, claiming that “faggots were all child molesters” and that it was “my time to pay back all those gays who picked on me all my life.”

The gang violence used by the bisexual females in this study was very different than the harmful actions of the gay and bisexual males. Theorizing these variations must take into account the distinct differences in context and nature of these gender strategies. Consider the case of Kristy, a twenty year-old bisexual single mother, whose one year-old baby had been apprehended by child protection officials due to her alcohol abuse and street-entrenched lifestyle. Kristy was enrolled in school at the time of the study; however, she was abusing substances and was in unstable housing. She had lived on the street for most of her teenage years, and lived by a street code: “You rat on somebody, you’re out of town. It’s a respect thing. If you charge someone, the police (get involved)...There’s a whole bunch of street rules.” When she was seventeen, she was dealing drugs to survive, and was a member of a neo-nazi skinhead gang. At one point, two black males flashed a lot of money at her, asking for drugs. She asked them to meet her in a park nearby. Kristy assembled a group of her street friends and “boot-fucked him (one of the victims) – took everything, his jacket, his money.” She used a gun in the attack. Although a number of her friends were convicted of aggravated assault and assault with a weapon, Kristy left town with her boyfriend to avoid the charges.

Kristy turned to the streets to get away from severe violence at home from both her biological parents. They also rejected her bisexuality. “Dad used to beat the fuck out of me. I think it was built into my genes...He said he owned me – he could marry me off. His ability to beat the crap out of me had an effect on me.” Once on the street, however, her idyllic image of a peaceful, loving ‘street family’ was shattered. She needed to be violent to survive: “I’ve used it to protect myself – best way I know how. I’m not gonna call the police – they’d laugh in my face.” Although she acknowledged her responsibility in the violence, she rationalized it: “But there’s rules downtown. It’s all about power. As long as I keep my power, I’m happy...It’s about control over everyone. They can’t ever touch me...you have a reputation to keep... If I feel threatened or my reputation is threatened (I’ll fight). I take care of big things like that.” Kristy

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reported that she had been in too many serious street fights involving weapons to count. She had been convicted of a number of offenses, including possession of narcotics, aggravated assault, possession of a weapon, and assault causing bodily harm. Somehow, she had avoided spending lengthy periods of time in custody. She maintained that she had spent no more than a total of six months in young offender (YO) facilities from age fourteen – seventeen years. She had never been incarcerated in an adult facility.

Kristy used excuses to explain why her behaviour was violent, and why she was not in the wrong. She said: “I’m a faggot. It’s me killing them or they’re (heterosexual gang members) gonna kill me. I’ve been picked on all my life because people think I’m a dyke.” She also distanced herself from heterosexual violence – in effect, she excused her own actions because she was bisexual: “I watched my Dad kick the shit outta my Mom, and he beat me. He’s straight. I’m not.” Her gang clearly offered her protection from and retaliation for the street violence she routinely faced. Her gang provided her the space to resist the traditional gender roles of her parents and negotiate a situationally specific identity which provided her with self-definition and empowerment.

Did Kristy do gender in a similar way as the girls in Jody Miller’s study? It is likely that the gender strategies she employed were different, in part due to her bisexuality. Yet, Kristy’s strategies were very different compared to those of the other bisexual young women in the study. This is likely due to variations in the structural spaces which they occupied.

Consider the case of Kathy, who was seventeen when she pled guilty to manslaughter. She had originally been charged with second-degree murder, along with a string of other serious violent offences. She was Aboriginal, had suffered traumatic sexual and physical violence throughout her young life, and had engaged in self-mutilation and suicidal behaviour since late childhood. She related her bisexuality to the fact that almost all the men in her life had beaten and raped her. She was deeply ashamed of her sexuality. She had been prostituting and drug dealing as a means of survival since age twelve, when she ran away from her tenth child welfare facility. She had her first baby at age thirteen, her second at age fifteen. Family members adopted them both. She said that she had been diagnosed with Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) at a young age.

Although she denied being a gang member, police and prison records suggested otherwise. She maintained that she merely “hung out with a bunch of bikers.” Her pathway into gang life was similar to that of the four other young Aboriginal women in the study. Vulnerable on the streets with no family, addicted and turning tricks to feed her cocaine habit, she was easily lured into an outlaw motorcycle gang (OMG) which provided her with protection from ‘johns’, other dealers, and the police (due to her age and state wardship, she would have been apprehended if discovered by the police). She described herself as a “biker chick”, essentially a sexual slave to her thirty year-old OMG co-accused. She was one of three young females in the gang (the other two were Caucasian). Kathy reported that the gang hated “fucking Indians”, and that there were roughly fifteen males in the gang, all in their late twenties or early thirties. She described what happened in the murder of a male peer:

“They (the police) said I was really violent, they said I had enough force to snap his neck back. The police said I was stomping on his chest, broke all his ribs.

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They made me sound very mean. I don't think I could because it would take a lot of force, I was 150 pounds when I came in, it would take a lot of force, especially drunk, you don't have that much force. And they said I had to have metal shoes to snap his neck back, that's what the Doctor said when he was testifying, and at the time I had Nike's. They didn't find nothing of mine, no footprints, no fingerprints, no gloves, no hair, no saliva, nothing...I don't know whether to believe them or not, I was scared and that. I didn't know, and they (gang members who got off) were saying that I was saying to them 'don't rat, don't rat.' And yet I remember them saying 'no one say nothing.' They twisted it and mixed it up. They know me for a person not to say nothing. So they all got picked up and they pinpointed me."

She denied her involvement and justified her behaviour by deflecting blame onto her co-accused. Instead of blaming the victim, she said that her co-accused caused it and provoked her. She also denied causing any injury to the victim, because she was wearing Nike's. She also said that she could not have inflicted any serious injury because she was 'drunk', 'just protecting myself', and only weighed 150 pounds. Medical records and police reports indicated otherwise.

Scully (1990) reported that 'deniers' defined their behaviour as wrong, yet they denied that it was rape. Sexual violence was justified given the deviant nature of their victims, or simply did not occur at all given their very narrow conceptualization of rape. In the current study, denial was a common element in accounts of murder, aggravated assault, home invasion, armed robbery, and hostage taking. In all these cases, the victims were apparently heterosexual, and the participants were serving sentences in young offender or adult correctional facilities. Participants like Kathy denied their involvement and justified their behaviour by constructing narrow definitions of violence and deflecting blame onto their victims, who were perceived as 'legitimate' victims.

It is likely that this denial was strongly related to the fact that many of these offenders had upcoming parole hearings or were due to be shortly released from juvenile custody. They likely did not want to jeopardize their reintegration into the community. None were sole perpetrators in their crimes; research has shown that when there are co-accused, there is a greater tendency to deny involvement.³²

When Kathy was questioned about her sexual experiences with other females, she noted that these relations began in early adolescence, long before she was incarcerated in female-only correctional institutions. All of her child welfare placements were in mixed-gender settings. Her sexual relations with other women were very different than those of Kristy (who had only been in YO mixed gender facilities for a short period of time) or Amy. Arguably, Kathy and Amy's intimate relations with other female inmates in prison were situationally specific gender strategies. It is interesting, however, that they both reported sexual experiences with other females prior to incarceration in prison. Both were in male dominated gangs. Whereas Kathy was one of three females, Amy was the only young woman in her gang.

Amy was a twenty year-old young Aboriginal, in prison for a manslaughter she committed at the age of fifteen. She had been beaten and sexually abused throughout her childhood by both male and female caregivers. She identified as bisexual, and carried much shame and guilt about this. She made it clear that if her family or community

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found out about her sexual practices, she would be shunned. She was part of an Aboriginal street gang heavily involved in pimping, running guns and drug dealing. She described how she got involved in the streets:

“I was supplying myself and my sister, on the street, ‘cause she was on the street to use, but she just, I don’t know how she came into my life that way, I didn’t want to bring her around that type of life, but I had to’ cause she had no where else to go, I had no place for her, I sold drugs here and stuff like that...I was in care of child family group homes and stuff, and they never gave me a foster family, I was always stuck in these places, and I started getting anger being in the block treatment and stuff. ...I think I tried suicide 30 times and slashed a lot...My mom was abusive to all of us, so my (grand)mom took me from my mother and she used to beat me every day and then I just got tired of it, and my dad phoned the cops on her and (child welfare), and my sister was already in care...I’ve had four (group home placements) and about 30 different receiving homes... I have seen her (biological mom) be abusive to herself and her boyfriend and stuff...(she) used to slash in front of us...I remember being scared and watching her, and begging her to stop.”

Amy went on to describe her involvement in a drive-by shooting of a drug dealer with her co-accused gang members:

“There were four people when we were arrested, we were all offered a deal to testify and to get off the charge of first degree murder. Me and my other co-accused didn’t take the deal. Four of them did (the other gang members)...I was driving the vehicle, but like to begin with I wasn’t the person (who shot), didn’t know where he (leader of the gang) was going at that time. I was a drug dealer and a prostitute. I owed them (the gang) money. I was actually leaving to go home. I was half way home and they pulled up at the other end and called me and then I asked them if they could drive me down there so I could pay off my dealer.”

Amy reported that she was the only female member of her gang. Her experiences were very different than those of Kathy and Kristy. It is likely that she accomplished her gender using different strategies. Being the lone female in an all-Aboriginal gang was a source of pride for her. She spoke passionately about how her cultural identity developed in the gang, almost as if this masked the sexual dominance she endured on a daily basis. Her account is characterized by denial. Her self-injurious behaviour (cutting with a razor, burning with matches) was also more frequent and severe compared to that of the other participants. She showed me her cutting journal, which she used to detail emotions and at times prevent incidents of self-harm. Blood was spattered over many of the pages. This excerpt is illustrative of her thoughts:

“So now I feel somewhat in better control. I hate myself for doing this. When I was younger, it was all good and happy. Now, I’m sad, and I hurt myself to like myself better. I’m a fucking mess. I hate my life, I hate myself, I hate what I

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have become. Even though I feel in control after I cut, it doesn't last for long. I'm a train going 500 miles a minute off the tracks."

Bob, an Afro-American sixteen year-old, belonged to a black street gang which was primarily involved in the cocaine trade. He reported that he was terrified that other gang members would discover that he was gay. He talked at length about the terrible experience of gang initiation, when he was forced to have sex publicly with gang "hoochies" (young women associated with the gang who were traded as sexual objects among members, and who also sold cocaine on the streets and acted as lookouts for other criminal activities). Bob had spent the majority of his teenage years as a ward of the state, bouncing from one group home to another. He was never placed in a culturally sensitive setting, nor did he ever have the opportunity to get counselling support about his sexual orientation. Bob said that his mother was unable to protect him from beatings by her boyfriends. He broke down when telling me about his sexual anxieties:

"(Sobbing) 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, and fuck a lot. I'm no queer...What's the point to life if you're a faggot? You would be nothing."

Bob spoke about the tremendous pressure he was under to demonstrate to his friends that he was not gay or female, along with his fears about his sexuality. Although Bob told me a number of times that he was not gay, he was very emotional, and towards the end of the interview disclosed that he was in fact gay. Within the heterosexual gang context, he said that for his own safety, he had to prove that he was "no faggot". Bob said that one way to protect himself in the gang was to have a girlfriend, and publicly degrade her sexually. The social space in which he constructed his gender was very different compared to that of Phil. He was black, fatherless, in care.

The truth status of Bob's account was very high. He admitted to using violence against female peers as a means of covering up his own sexual orientation. Although distraught, he said he was terrified about what would happen if fellow gang members found out that he was gay. He did not use denial.

Reaction Formation

Albert Cohen's (1955) analysis of reaction formation is useful for analyzing the participation of GBT youth in hard core gangs. Cohen's theory hinges upon his assumption that working class juvenile delinquents, having internalized middle class cultural standards, protect their self-image from failure to achieve these standards. They deny any attachments to the material benefits of middle class success. He theorized that these youth accept conventional values and norms and have feelings of guilt and shame resulting from status problems. On a similar note, I argue that some GBT delinquent youth, socialized in a culture which demands compulsory heterosexism,³³ protect their own self-image and personal safety by publicly denying any affiliation with gay culture. Many have tremendous feelings of guilt, shame, and self-hatred due to rejection by family and bullying and other forms of intolerance in their lives. They gain temporary

relief from this by publicly beating anyone who resembles themselves.

General strain theory has been used to explain how inability to achieve monetary success and/or middle class status can be related to criminal behaviour³⁴. The participants in the current study were not only economically marginal, but socially marginal due to the trauma they had suffered and their sexual orientation or gender identity. Although by no means uniform, many of the boys in the study appeared to play out their marginalization in a hyper-masculine, hyper-sexual fashion. Interestingly, the girls, all bisexual, seemed to adopt many of the traditional heterosexual male behaviours: violence, toughness, independence, and hyper-sexuality.

Although Sykes and Matza never conceived of sexual orientation in their work on techniques of neutralization, I suggest that their models for understanding the discourse of delinquent youth are applicable to the GBT youth gang members in this study. Almost all participants denied wrongdoing by using justifications and excuses. Their subculture was identifiable by the condition of “drift”³⁵, which gave them the option to take “a kind of moral holiday”³⁶. Social support from gang members was critical for participants to act on their willingness to deviate. This group support was by no means all negative. Gangs provided participants with an identity, feelings of acceptance, and a sense of belonging. Many of them referred to their gangs as the “families they never had.” They all described terrible maltreatment in their homes, and rejection due to their gender identity or sexuality. Unfortunately, it seems that their gangs were just as violent, if not more dangerous than their families of origin. On top of this, they were unable to be themselves in these gangs – they had to pretend to be heterosexual. It would therefore appear that the participant’s desperate search for belonging and acceptance not only led them to use extreme violence; it also likely amplified the hatred they had for themselves. The participants seem to have exhibited an extreme form of what Herek, Adams and other researchers have termed internalized homophobia.

An intriguing finding of this study is that participants who reported participation in gay bashing did not talk about the apparent incongruity between their own gender or sexual identity and their violent actions against victims they so closely resembled. How could the participants present such similar behaviour so differently? The participants were scared young people who indicated that their lives were worthless. They routinely exhibited defensive posturing, understanding that they had to constantly protect themselves from the outside world. Many learned how to protect their self-image by picking on the less powerful. In order to construct who and what they were, the participants had to draw the line demarcating what they were not.

I propose that these youth suspected that they were like the ‘faggots’ and ‘dykes’ they claimed to be hunting. They were attempting to convince themselves and others that they were exactly the opposite. They protected their self-image by exerting brute homophobic violence over the less powerful; their identities were reaffirmed and expressed. In order to construct who and what they were, the participants had to draw the line with what they were not. These youth presented their behaviour as being exactly the opposite to the behaviour of their victims. They recognized too much of themselves in their victims, and were afraid that they were going to become just like them.

They had accepted conventional values and norms around heterosexuality and had feelings of guilt and shame resulting from status problems. Fuelled by self-hatred and the need for protection, they may have been protesting against the unattainable imperatives

of the heterosexual cultural ideal. They likely were experiencing strain³⁷. Their violent behaviour is suggested to have compensated for and covered up whatever could not be realized. As well, they reported that they found excitement and adventure in violent crime, simultaneously finding an outlet to express their anger and rage.³⁸ Perhaps these youth were able to momentarily transcend their perceived worthlessness and self-hatred during these acts of violence. Many described these situations as a psychological “rush”; a feeling of omnipotence.

Research, Policy and Practice Implications

The issues raised by the young people participating in this study are deeply troubling. Their stories of pain, suffering and rejection are difficult to hear. Yet, the lengths they went to find acceptance are equally disturbing. How can it be that some GBT youth turn to hard core violent gangs for identity and belonging, given the extreme homophobia exhibited by these groups? What responsibility do we have in these tragic situations? How can we intervene effectively?

Although there is considerable debate in the research literature over the origins of gender identity and sexual orientation,³⁹ it is clear in this study that the participants all suffered serious maltreatment throughout their short and difficult lives. They all related these social experiences as being critical factors in their identity formation. All of the young women said that they had suffered historical sexual abuse by male caregivers, boyfriends and ‘johns’. They had likewise experienced beatings by these same men. The young men had all endured beatings and been witness to the maltreatment of their mothers. They reported that these experiences had shaped their identities. Does this mean that biology was irrelevant? Certainly not. It merely sheds some new light on the relevancy of traumatic social experiences with some sexual and gender minority youth.

In Canada, there is an undeclared public health epidemic of child maltreatment. Many more children suffer from the adverse effects of child abuse compared to those affected by cancer and AIDS combined. Many maltreated kids have impaired physical, emotional, cognitive and social functioning.⁴⁰ There is good evidence suggesting that successful interventions target high-risk neighbourhoods using a public health approach. In-home visitation by public health nurses of disadvantaged first-time mothers is a proven strategy to prevent child abuse.⁴¹ Yet, we do not dedicate nearly enough resources to this enormous problem. Children, like the ones in this study, suffer.

The dynamics around GBT involvement in hard-core street gangs need further exploration. There are no published studies in this area. The youth in this study certainly endured years of suffering as a result of their gender or sexual orientation; yet, they also meted out severe violence. It would not appear as though female bisexual participants faced the same degree of risk in gangs compared their male counterparts. Although there may be a number of factors related to this, the sample from this current study is far too small to generate any conclusions in this area.

Clearly, hard core youth gangs are violent, and their members face considerable risk to their own personal safety while at the same time endangering the lives of others. Arguably, GBT gang members are at the highest risk of suffering life-threatening harm out of all young people who participate in these anti-social, criminal groups. This risk is directly related to the extreme homophobia which characterizes many male dominated, heterosexual gang activities. Sadly, the youth in this study turned to the streets to escape

the brutal maltreatment at home and, for many, because of the rejection they faced due to their sexual orientation and gender identity. It is interesting that they chose gangs for acceptance and belonging – where the homophobia and violence was likely just as harmful as what they had experienced at home.

What is to be done? First, much more research, both qualitative and quantitative, is needed on GBT youth gang members. Some critical questions need to be addressed, such as: what is the extent of GBT youth participation in gangs? Are there any hard core gangs dominated by these youth, or are they primarily involved in heterosexual dominated gangs? Is lesbianism and bisexuality more acceptable in female dominated gangs, compared to the secrecy surrounding gay and bisexual male youth participation in male dominated gangs? What, if any, is the nature of the relationship between child maltreatment, sexual orientation, and gang involvement?

Second, gang prevention programs should become sensitized to issues of sexual orientation and gender identity. This is a very complicated and delicate area to explore with young adolescents. Research has shown that although children do not begin to question their sexual orientation until late childhood or early adolescence,⁴² the development of gender identity begins much earlier – even as young as age four or five years.⁴³ Many parents and school administrators are resistant to discussing these issues, for fear that it will encourage children to become GBT. The most effective way to address homophobia in schools is to incorporate anti-homophobia lessons into the curricula, including school-wide educational workshops led by GBT teachers, youth, or social workers. Following these workshops, it is common for students to organize GBT support groups. Finally, in the late 1990's, gay/straight alliances began forming on some campuses in the USA, and have since migrated up to Canada. These alliances can have effectively confront incidents of gender-based discrimination in schools.⁴⁴

Finally, gang intervention programs should also become sensitized to these same issues. In particular, we know that GBT youth are at very high risk of attempting suicide and engaging in other self-destructive behaviours. Data from this current study suggest that these youth direct violence inward at the same time that they are endangering the lives of others. Mental health should therefore be a key area of intervention with these young people. Before exploring issues related to gender identity and sexual orientation with these youth, it is important that the social worker or police officer be comfortable discussing this topic and be aware of their own potential biases. Specialized training on GBT issues is strongly recommended.

About the Author

Dr. Mark Totten works with groups across Canada and in other countries on evidence-based practices in the areas of gangs, crime prevention, mental health, and violence. He is President of Totten and Associates, a consulting company with the mission of “doing social justice science that makes a real difference in the lives of complex need people and their communities”. He is currently collaborating with groups across Canada in the development and evaluation of multi-year gang prevention, intervention and suppression strategies. Mark is past Director of Research at the Youth Services Bureau of Ottawa (1987-2007) and has worked with high-risk children, youth and families for three decades. He has a Master of Social Work and a Ph.D. in Sociology. He is an expert witness on gangs and a certified social worker. He has authored over 60 books, academic

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End Notes

¹ Totten, 2000a, 2002a.

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² Suicide Prevention Resource Centre, 2008; Kitts, 2005; Whitbeck, 2004; Mallon, 2001; Alexander, 2000; Totten, 2000b; The McCreary Centre Society, 1999.

³ Sex is used here to mean the biological status of being male or female. Sexual orientation refers to the direction of sexual, emotional and physical attraction (heterosexual, lesbian, gay). Gender refers to the social beliefs, meanings and behaviour ascribed to masculinity and femininity. Whereas sex is physiological, gender is socially constructed and learned (Herek, 1992).

⁴ Totten, 2001.

⁵ For example, see Chambliss, 1973; Schwendinger and Schwendinger, 1983; Spergel and Curry, 1988; Curry and Spergel, 1991; Sullivan, 1989; Spergel, 1995.

⁶ Hagedorn, 1993; Harry, 1992; Hill and Santiago, 1992; Weissman, 1992; Beirne and Messerschmidt, 1991; Comstock, 1991; Connell, 1991; Katz, 1988; Schwendinger and Schwendinger, 1983; Messerschmidt, 1986, 1993; Chambliss, 1973; Willis, 1977.

⁷ For example, see Ambert, 2005; Tully, 2001; Renzetti, 1992; Comstock, 1991.

⁸ Halpern et al., 2004; Tully, 2001; Alexander, 2000; McCreary Centre Society, 1999.

⁹ Dahir, 2000: 33.

¹⁰ For example, see Whitbeck, 2004; Kitts, 2005; Mallon, 2001; Savin-Williams, 1994; O'Brien, Travers, and Bell, 1993.

¹¹ See Kelly and Totten, 2002.

¹² Ibid; Totten, 2001; Heide, 1999.

¹³ Messerschmidt, 1993, 1997.

¹⁴ Messerschmidt, 2000.

¹⁵ Thrasher, 1927; Blumer, 1969; Shaw, 1930; Mead, 1934; Keiser, 1969.

¹⁶ Adams et al., 1996; Meyer and Dean, 1988; Herek et al., 1998; Herek, 1984.

¹⁷ Adams et al., 1996.

¹⁸ Slaby, 1994; West, 1977.

¹⁹ Adams et al, 1996.

²⁰ Strauss, 1990.

²¹ Koss and Gidycz, 1985.

²² Totten, 2000a, 2001.

²³ It is easier to audio-tape interviews with youth convicted of serious crimes of violence, who are doing time in juvenile or adult correctional facilities (see Kelly and Totten, 2002). Some of the participants in this current study who were living in the community said it was too risky for me to record their conversations on violence (they thought they might be apprehended for their crimes).

²⁴ See Glaser and Straus, 1967.

²⁵ See Appendices in Totten, 2000a, 2002a.

²⁶ Hammersley, 1992:165

²⁷ For example, see Scully, 1990.

²⁸ Silverman, 1993.

²⁹ Kanin, 1967.

³⁰ Ptacek, 1988.

³¹ All names and some socio-demographic data have been changed to protect the anonymity of participants.

³² Kelly and Totten, 2002.

³³ Rich, 1980.

³⁴ See Broidy and Agnew, 1997.

³⁵ Matza, 1964.

³⁶ Box, 1981: 112.

³⁷ See Broidy and Agnew, 1997, for an interesting discussion on the applicability of general strain theory to the explanation of male and female involvement in criminal behaviour.

³⁸ Katz, 1988, has written extensively on this topic.

³⁹ DeCecco and Parker, 1995; Parker and DeCecco, 1995.

⁴⁰ Totten, 2009.

⁴¹ Totten, 2010.

⁴² Mallon, 1999a.

⁴³ Mallon, 1999b; Risely, 1986; Zucker, 1985.

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⁴⁴ For example, see the Gay-Straight Alliance website www.gsanetwork.org; or GenderPAC (Political Action Coalition) <http://www.gpac.org>