Chapter 8

Gender Dynamics of Violent Acts among Gang Affiliated Young Adult Mexican American Men

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines how gender dynamics shape violent acts among Mexican American young adult males with a history of adolescent gang membership. We use the concept of hegemonic masculinity to examine the various ways that gender is performed in acts of violence (Connell, 1995). Masculinity is not a fixed entity or individual personality traits, masculinities are “configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular setting” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005:836). In other words, “gender identity is never a completed project, but always a developmental process which unfolds within a social context” (Messner, 1990:209). Nevertheless, the tendencies for aggression and violence are central to what it means to be masculine (Messerschmidt, 2000; Crowley, Foley et al., 2008) because “real men” must show others that they are not afraid (Kimmel, 2010). We examine the unfolding of masculine identity among disadvantaged Mexican American men in two different yet related contexts: violent acts with other men and the retelling of these violent acts. Among disadvantaged men, in general, social class is central to masculinity because these men are likely to have limited options in accomplishing their masculinity compared to men with more advantages (Britton, 2011; Messerschmidt, 1993; Stretesky & Pogrebin, 2007). The type of masculinity expressed by Mexican American males, more specifically, varies depending on a constellation of variables related to social class including income, generational status, education, and association with the criminal justice system (Rios, 2011; Valdez, 2007).

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INTRODUCTION

We assert that the men in this study perform “manhood acts” (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009) through their engagement in violent behavior and posturing with other men. Others have attributed these types of gendered behaviors among this population as hypermasculinity defined as an exaggerated demonstration of physical strength and aggression (Harris, 2008) and some criminologists have argued that criminal acts, in general, can be interpreted as an endeavor to prove a type of masculinity. For instance, Dekeseredy and Schwartz (2005) argue that “violence is, under certain situations, the only perceived available technique of expressing and validating masculinity” (p. 362). This type of “hard” masculinity based on physical prowess (Spaaij, 2008) is explicitly fashioned through bodily relations in which the human body is turned into a weapon to be used against other bodies (Messner, 1990). Men who prove their manhood by using violence may only call on physical violence in certain situations (threatened by perceived rival) or spaces (the street) and not in others (the home) (Copes & Hochstetler, 2003). Nevertheless, this type of aggressive masculinity located in particular times and spaces has complex interrelationships with other cultural sites such as the family, labor markets, and criminal legal system (Spaaij, 2008). For example, men with few outlets for performing masculinity within the formal labor market may be more likely to engage in criminal and violent behaviors in certain situations as a mechanism for constructing their masculinity. Violence can be just one of many ways of “doing gender” in a culturally specific way (DeKessenger & Schwartz, 2005).

The men described in this chapter comprise a distinct group of Mexican American young adult males. Considering culture and class variables, masculinity may be more salient among Latinos than other race/ethnic groups (Alvirez, Bean et al., 1981; Galanti, 2003; Rios, 2011) as Mexican American men hold significantly more traditional attitudes toward male roles (Ojeda, Rosales, & Good, 2008). Research also suggests that nonimmigrant street-oriented Latino youth may be more susceptible to cultural values systems that are associated with violence (Umemoto, 2006; Vigil, 1988) and that persons of Mexican origin may be especially vulnerable given their persistent racialized status (Telles & Ortiz, 2008). The Mexican cultural concept of machismo signifies male power, aggression, and honor but also fearlessness, self-sufficiency, and courage (Valdez, 2007). Quintero and Estrada (1998) identify a type of machismo in the U.S.-Mexico border context (the site of the current study) that operates within the world of drugs and life on the streets as distinguished from the machismo of the home. This cultural model of machismo is embedded in other meanings that revolve around using violence to gain social status and respect, achieving a degree of protection and self-defense, and promoting drug use and abuse to the detriment of other more positive cultural models of machismo and manhood.

Goffman’s theory of the presentation of self (1959) and Turner and Tajfel’s theory of intergroup conflict regarding social identity (1979) are integrated together as the theoretical framework for this chapter. In the theory of the presentation of self, Goffman presents a dramaturgical model of human life and uses it as the conceptual model for understanding life-in-society. In this view, people in everyday life are actors on stage, and the audience consists of those who observe what others are doing, the parts are the roles that people play, the dialogue consists of ritualized conversational exchanges, and the costuming consists of whatever clothing happens to be in style. According to the theory, the initial definition of the situation projected by an individual tends to provide a plan for the cooperative activity that follows, and any projected definition of the situation also has a distinctive moral character. Society is organized on the principle that any individual who possesses certain social characteristics has a moral right to expect that others will value and treat them in an appropriate way.