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Young People's Understandings of Men's Violence Against Women

Nancy Lombard

The book 'Young People's Understandings of Men's Violence Against Women' represents a much needed sociological account of how young people aged 11-12 make sense of gender based violence. Lombard offers a detailed critical analysis of focus group interviews with young people, attending to their explanations of male violence against women. Her intention is to extend our understanding of how young people make sense of gender based violence, through the use of an intersectional lens – attending specifically to the interrelationships of age and gender in young people's accounts of male violence against women.

The book is based on a series of focus groups with young people of late primary school age, in the UK. The focus groups were conducted with a general community sample, and was not focused on young people who had specific experience of gender based violence. The groups were structured around vignettes – short stories about violence. The analysis highlights how young people constructed gender, how this tied into heteronormative constructions of masculinity and femininity, and the implications of this for young people's labelling and understanding of gender based violence. Lombard particularly attends to how young people's meaning making in relation to intersections of temporality, spatiality and gender. Whilst young people were able to view gender as flexible for themselves, they saw it as static for adults, and located it within a heterosexual set of assumptions about adult life. Young people judged violence as 'real' if it involved adults, took place outside young people's own spaces, when there was evidence (an injury) and when an authority (e.g. the police) confirmed it. They were less likely to label violence as real when it took place in their own sphere (e.g. playground, school, home), when it was between people close to them (e.g. violence perpetrated by their siblings, or their peers), and when it involved those who were of a similar age. Young people also drew on normative understandings of masculinity and femininity that naturalise violence for men. The intersections of these discursive frameworks make it more likely that young people not label violence in their own relationships as violence, and that they normalise young male violence when directed to young females. Lombard suggests *"This lack of validation resulted in young people accepting and minimising their own roles of perpetration and victimisation."* (131)

Through this analysis, Lombard explores young people's ability to maintain, resist and accept gender identities and expectations. This illuminates how they make sense of violence against women, how their understandings function to facilitate minimisation and acceptance, as well as the cracks and fissures in these understandings that might best enable us to undermine the justificatory practices that maintain such violence. This provides useful insights into prevention of violence against women, by opening up spaces to challenge normative constructions of gender, and the naturalisation of male aggression that positions violence as an inevitable consequence of heterosexual relating.

Lombard also provides useful insights into the constraints professionals impose on children's capacity to voice their experiences. Her commentary on gatekeeping practices when trying to talk to young people in the general population about gender based violence echoed our own experiences of trying to talk to young people about domestic violence (Alexander, Callaghan, Fellin, & Sixsmith, 2016; Callaghan, Alexander, Sixsmith, & Fellin, 2016; Callaghan & Alexander, 2015). Whilst adults might see themselves as 'protecting' the innocence and vulnerability of children by blocking them from discussing issues that they might see as 'adult' (like domestic violence), their gatekeeping practices result in a silencing of young people's perspectives, and their exclusion from debates,

discussions and policy contexts where their voices need to be heard (Houghton, 2015). As a consequence young people are not consulted about issues that have profound implications for current and future relationships.

The book is intelligent, insightful, and opens up new possibilities to consider in intervening to prevent coercive and violent relationships for young people. It makes complex theory from sociology and social geography accessible, applying it in clear and trenchant ways to the specific issue of violence against women. It highlights the importance of hearing young people's perspectives in order to open critical spaces to challenge the social and political conditions that support such violence in young people's relationships. This enables us, potentially, to move our interventions with young people away from a superficial focus on behaviour, attitudes and social skills for young people, thinking instead about the transformation of gender itself, and the way that it shapes personal relationships.