

Masculinities, street life, and violence: a qualitative secondary examination

Ph.D Dissertation

Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice
University of Missouri St. Louis

Christopher W. Mullins

Abstract

This dissertation explores how definitions of masculinities within streetlife social networks shaped perceptions and enactments of violence on the streets of Saint Louis, Missouri, as uncovered in a secondary analysis of 110 interviews with active offenders collected in four separate interview projects. It explores the contours of masculinities on the streets and analyzes how these gendered structures interacted with and defined the nature of street violence. Conceptually, it combines feminist theorizing of the linkage between masculinities and crime with work on the subculture of streetlife. This project establishes how street-based gender identity motivated and guided men through violent encounters, especially those taking the form of "masculinity challenges"--contests between men used to establish gender capital on the streets. It further explores how men's relationships with women and their families instigated violence, out of a perceived need to protect female relatives, as well as defused violent incidents. It illuminates key contradictions within street masculinity concerning violence directed at both men and women. Specifically, it finds that there is tension among how men defined the accomplishment of retaliatory victimization against other men when the chosen modality was not a direct face-to-face challenge. While generally men in the sample labeled the use of violence against women as "unmanly", the dissertation uncovers multiple contingencies used to justify such violence on the streets. It concludes with an examination of how the data at hand show why men activated violence in certain situations and not in others. The array of choices presented to men in regard to violence is emphasized; how these variant opportunities were interpreted is essential to understanding the linkages of masculinity and violence.