

Marion Brown Successfully Defends PhD

Congratulations to Marion Brown who successfully defended her dissertation on February 20th, 2008, titled: *She Hits Like A Girl: Contexts and Constraints of Femininity, Use of Violence and Living in Group Homes*.



The Examination Committee chaired by Dr. Faye Murrin (Acting Associate Dean, School of Graduate Studies, MUN) included Dr. Meda Chesney-Lind (Professor, Women's Studies Program, University of Hawaii at Manoa); Dr. Tracy Swan (Assistant Professor, School of Social Work, MUN); Dr. Morgan Gardner (Assistant Professor, Faculty of Education, MUN).

The Supervisory Committee chaired by Dr. Leslie Bella (Honorary Research Professor, School of Social Work, MUN)

Abstract

Public and scholarly interest in youth violence has steadily increased over the past twenty years, as governments and communities strive to address concerns regarding the safety and well being of its citizens. In Canada, the tragic beating death of Reena Virk in 1997 prompted an emphasis on girls' use of violence in particular. Media representations and their concomitant public anxiety often represent a chasm between popular and professional understandings of these behaviours and their use by girls, given that outward acting, physically aggressive behaviour conflicts with popular notions of what it means to be female, and theoretical constructs for understanding violence have been based on ontological and epistemological positions that take the male experience, literature, and research as normative.

This qualitative study explored the perspectives and interpretations of 22 young women, ages 14 to 24 years, regarding their experiences of being female, using violence, and living in residential settings. The data suggest that these girls are continually negotiating the terms of what it means to be female, shaping and being shaped by gender stereotypes, role models, interactions with boys, and the ongoing scrutiny of other girls as extensions of themselves. Further, the data suggest that girls fight each other based on principles of loyalty and morality, and to convey specific messages about their relationships with boys, being verbally maligned, and having their personal possessions stolen. Finally, navigating the living space is an ongoing and intricate process for these girls. Understanding the requirements of the physical setting, the formal and informal rules, and the shifting dynamics of staff and residents, ensures that the living context is never fully known.

Analyzing the data in relation to the literature, this study theorizes that these girls are raised according to discourses of choice yet experience material and discursive constraints; that they are watching and being watched in a state of perpetual surveillance; and that they are continually bargaining femininity, neither resisting femininity nor embracing masculinity in their use of violence.