

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Gender, Heterosexuality, and Youth Violence: The Struggle for Recognition by James W. Messerschmidt

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and sidewalks—as public spaces—are technically not, more discussion about the differences in terrains of interaction would be helpful. To what degree do status boundaries within the clubs percolate onto the public streets, and vice versa?

Urban Nightlife provides unique detail and keen insight on how race and class continue to structure micro-social interactions in public space. This book could easily be assigned in courses on race and ethnicity, urban sociology, and class and inequality. The subject matter of nightlife is of great interest to most college students and provides a relatable way to discuss core sociological topics of race and class. The author's style of writing is clear and accessible and should appeal to undergraduates and interested scholars.

Reference

Grazian, David. 2008. *On the Make: The Hustle of Urban Nightlife*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Gender, Heterosexuality, and Youth Violence: The Struggle for Recognition, by James W. Messerschmidt. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012. 218 pp. \$28.00 paper. ISBN: 9781442213715.

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Sociological criminology developed out of a focus on the social causes of crime, largely to eschew attempts to reduce crime and deviant behaviors to matters of biological difference. A powerful consequence of this frame, however, was the elimination of all things having to do with the body (e.g., biology, sexuality). And as James Messerschmidt states, "If one empirical observation is unquestionable, it is that the vast majority of those who engage in crime do so with, and through, their bodies" (p. 1). In order to explore the ways in which body, sexuality, and gender intersect with/within experiences of bullying and youth violence, in *Gender, Heterosexuality, and Youth Violence* Messerschmidt examines the life histories of six white, working-class boys and girls. Four have

been convicted of physical and sexual assault, while two purposely chose routes of nonviolence, and all have been victims of bullying. Presenting details about each youth's family, school, and peer relationships, Messerschmidt analyzes their stories of bullying combined with the explanations these youth offer for engaging (or not) in different forms of violence. In doing so, the author makes a compelling case for broadening our understanding of crime and violence to include issues, realities, and experiences of embodiment within our studies of youth violence and criminology generally.

Messerschmidt's work is grounded in the historical development of sociological criminology. The first part of the book outlines this development, including a detailed description of the contributions of Edwin Sutherland and feminist criminologists. The beginnings of the discipline rested on assumptive notions of the sex/gender binary, a consequence of disciplinary aims that sought to centralize the social. This historical reaffirmation of mind/body and sex/gender dichotomies is something contemporary researchers have contested, challenging scholars and lay people alike to see the social construction of gender as pivotal to processes of crime—for both victims and perpetrators. However, as Messerschmidt argues, even these new attempts still rely on the sex/gender binary, thereby reaffirming the notion that the social construction of gender and gendered behaviors/expectations assume the preexistence of sexual differences. And while many theorists (Michel Foucault and Thomas Laqueur are specifically noted) have argued for a rejection of these boundaries, Messerschmidt further contends that this rejection alone is inadequate. Instead, sociological and feminist criminology must instead specifically concentrate on the ways in which gender and sexuality are embodied, as well as how this embodiment is contextually (situationally and interactionally) defined. It is from this launching-off point that Messerschmidt begins his project—working to challenge the ways in which we make sense of and understand the *hows* and the *whys* of youth violence and/or nonviolence.

Using gender and sexuality as his primary lenses of analysis, Messerschmidt demonstrates how notions of hegemonic

masculinity—including strength, toughness, and heterosexuality—shape subjects' understandings of their experiences of bullying, thereby shaping their choices to engage in various acts of violence (or not). Messerschmidt further demonstrates the ways in which body type/size and gender expression are linked to the bullying they experience; and this, in turn, works to shape the choices they have for responding to, coping with, and/or combatting the harassment.

Messerschmidt's work makes two especially important contributions. First, as suggested above, the author forces readers to think about bullying as a challenge to gender and sexuality. All six of the subjects were victims of harrowing forms of bullying, and their narratives provide powerful examples of the ways in which youth are challenged to negotiate dominant norms of gender and sexuality. In addition to foregrounding agency and reflexivity, Messerschmidt further demonstrates the ways in which gender and sexuality—and how they are successfully accomplished (or not)—are contextual. For example, while the majority of subjects' bullying experiences happened at school, their responses to the bullying (e.g., engaging in acts of physical or sexual violence) most often occurred outside of school—either in the neighborhood or at home. This demonstrates quite clearly the fluidity of gender/sexual expressions—successfully accomplishing gender in one space can easily coexist with “gender failures” in another. Still, these spaces are connected and influence one another.

This book offers some great insights, but there are several issues that I believe readers may find disconcerting. First, and perhaps most concerning to gender and feminist scholars, is the lack of diversity among the subjects included. To be sure, Messerschmidt clearly acknowledges this, recognizing the potential limitations of a sample that it is all white and working-class. Certainly this sample provides for a way of bracketing race and class diversity to focus solely on gender and sexuality. But this narrow sampling also raises some potential questions about how individuals reflexively understand and make sense of bullying—are gender norms the central challenge they face? What does

bullying look like when expectations and experiences of race and class-based resources are included? Do victims respond in similar or different ways? Since, as many feminist scholars have argued, gender is always raced and classed, a discussion about the ways in which the subjects' whiteness and class status may have offered them additional privileges on which to rely as they negotiate gender norms would have been useful. Some scholars may also find it problematic that Messerschmidt's analysis is largely constructed around the gender binary that he admonishes early on in the text. How might bullying, and the reactions that follow, look different when other gender expressions are taken into account?

Finally, while the topic is certainly compelling, the text itself is seemingly bifurcated. The detailed history of gender and sexuality within sociological criminology and/or studies of crime and violence presented early in the text seems disconnected from the latter half of the book. Additionally, one of the strengths of the work—Messerschmidt's focus on reflexivity—is also one of the book's weaknesses. The author's use of, and reliance on, notions of reflexivity, repression, and recognition are utilized with little to no explanation or foregrounding of what he intends to accomplish with these analytical tools. At several points, the author suggests that this book is part of a much larger project, existing in relation to his own previously published texts. Perhaps the disconnectedness I experienced stems from the fact that I haven't read these other works—an important note that may be useful for readers who are especially familiar with Messerschmidt's earlier research on this project, but also for those who are not so familiar.

These critiques aside, there is much to appreciate in this book, and I think sociological criminologists, scholars interested in contemporary studies of bullying and youth violence, and sociologists studying sexuality and gender will find Messerschmidt's contributions insightful. This book would be useful in a graduate or advanced undergraduate seminar; but the disconnectedness and Messerschmidt's tendency toward jargon may make it a challenging read for many undergraduate courses.