

## BOOK REVIEWS / COMPTE RENDUS

### **Teens Who Hurt: Clinical Interventions to Break the Cycle of Adolescent Violence**

*By Kenneth V. Hardy and Tracey A. Laszloffy*

Guildford Publication, 280 pages, ISBN 1-57230-749-8, Price \$35.00

Reviewed by Lew Golding, Manager of the Substance Abuse Program for African Canadian and Caribbean Youth, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, Toronto

In *Teens Who Hurt: Clinical Interventions to Break the Cycle of Adolescent Violence*, Kenneth Hardy and Tracey Laszloffy intend to provide therapists and other professionals with a framework and strategies for working with violent youth and their families. I believe they have achieved their goal. Drawing on their extensive clinical practice and research, the authors present four critical factors that foster violence among youth: devaluation, erosion of community, dehumanized loss, and rage. This book illustrates and offers effective ways to understand and address these factors.

As a practitioner with a particular interest in substance abuse, mental health, and violence among youth, I am often asked, “How do you do that work? How do you engage such angry, dangerous, and hard-to-access youth?” My answer is now succinctly articulated: This book is an education that violence and violent adolescents can be understood beyond the “act.”

Hardy and Laszloffy present a timely, innovative treatment approach for understanding and dealing with violent youth and their families. This approach is particularly relevant to many discussions across Canada. The national media continues to flag youth violence as an issue of concern, and reports often reference the City of Toronto’s challenges regarding gun violence and Black youth. Essentially, Hardy and Laszloffy make the point that teens who hurt, are hurt. They present well-contextualized case examples from American experience that are directly relevant and applicable to our Canadian experience.

Drawing from their clinical experience, the authors comprehensively review the individual, psychological, and environmental factors that fuel violent behaviour. They challenge traditional thinking by detailing cause and effect relationships that go one step further. One such example is the way that they present a different frame of reference when talking about community as an environmental factor that can negatively affect youth. Community is viewed as an emotional, psychological, and physical phenomenon.

They define community as “a group of people who live in a specific area . . . share a common racial, ethnic, or religious identity. . . . [Community] involves feelings of belonging, rootedness, identity, connection, safety, security, familiarity, caring, and hope” (p. 63). Note the inclusion of “feelings”

as integral to their definition. Feelings are central to the authors' model, hence their view that kids who hurt are themselves hurt.

Moreover, Hardy and Laszloffy explain how disruption of community is, in essence, a disruption of psychological comforts. They write, "Seeing adolescents as hurt rather than bad is essential to successfully addressing and ultimately preventing adolescent violence" (p. 270). To that end, they offer practical treatment guidelines and interventions. This information is particularly relevant because it skilfully covers the impact of trauma and oppression on the lives of children, youth, and families. Presenting problems, such as violent behaviours, are rooted in this trauma and oppression.

Readers who provide services to marginalized youth who have committed acts of aggression and violence may use the following statement as a frame of reference: "Many of these kids are simultaneously committing both homicide and suicide" (p. 59). The suggestion here is that there is a lack of recognition of the links between the behaviour of the perpetrators and the causes of their actions. Hardy and Laszloffy contend that extremely violent behaviour, such as homicide, is linked to experiences of devaluation. Devaluation refers to experiences that diminish the teen's self-worth. Although not a complete explanation for Black youth, devaluation contributes to their collective sense of hopelessness and anger.

This book takes into account race, class, poverty, and gender as variables that contribute to marginalized youth's experience of devaluation and the ensuing expressions of violence. All are critical variables that compound the challenges practitioners face in their quest to fully understand and serve teens who hurt. The authors present several strong examples, including references to the 1999 shooting massacre at Columbine High School, to illustrate the links between maltreatment and violence. This link is a particularly relevant point for practitioners to consider. "As a function of their racial devaluation, few youth of colour identify with society's institutions" (p. 60). There is abundant evidence that a history of maltreatment is often associated with aggressive behaviours.

The authors' approach to intervention is fortified by their conceptual analysis and respective professional practice. Both authors are well-respected, and committed to providing ongoing contributions to those of us in the helping fields. Kenneth Hardy, PhD, is a professor of family therapy at Syracuse University, and Director of the Eikenberg Institute for Relationships in New York. He is interested in examining the impact of trauma and oppression on the lives of children and families, the aggravating factors associated with adolescent violence, and the dynamics of racial diversity and oppression in school systems. He is the former director of the Center for Children, Families, and Trauma at the Ackerman Institute for the Family in New York. Dr. Hardy has provided training and consultation for professionals working with troubled children and youth throughout the United States, Europe, and Asia. Tracey Laszloffy, PhD, is a relationship therapist who specializes in working with troubled adolescents and their families. She maintains a private practice in Connecticut, and previously directed the Marriage and Family Therapy master's program at Seton Hill University in Greensburg, Pennsylvania. Dr. Laszloffy has published extensively, and she routinely provides training and consultation to organizations that work with at-risk youth.

I particularly liked the inclusion of the importance of identifying and validating significant loss as another catalyst for connecting with youth. The authors propose that validation of loss often opens the

youth to new, constructive outlooks. They stress that youth who commit violence are communicating feelings that professionals often miss, likely due to our traditional focus on the violence and not on the person who behaves violently. The authors illustrate how significant figures in the lives of such youth often “skip over” what matters to the youth, in their efforts to ease discomfort. Hence, there are a series of missed opportunities to truly engage them. Case examples by both authors affirm their high level of respect and compassion for at-risk youth. They identify and illustrate the important elements of their model as catalysts for resilience.

The social and biological sciences have come to recognize the probability that the most important influences on the development of violent behaviours are environmental or experiential. This book leads me to question whether urban centres across North America challenged by youth violence are ready and able to acknowledge the contributing environmental factors. Hardy and Laszloffy go beyond the traditionally narrow psychological explanations of youth violence by encompassing the critical role played by the broader social environment. With sensitivity, compassion, and intelligence, they detail the many ways in which social toxins in an adolescent’s environment poison well-being and stimulate violence.

Hardy and Laszloffy submit that rage is not the problem: “Rage is the first emotion that adolescents access as they begin to connect with their losses emotionally” (p. 229). Adolescents are faced with questions and challenges that are related to issues of identity, separation, relationships, and purpose.

Ultimately, we want to assist adolescents in realizing that it’s okay to feel rage in response to pain and injustice of their losses. The critical issue involves what they do with their rage. . . . We try to help them develop skills and strategies for harnessing and directing the power of their rage positively so that it shapes and creates rather than attacks and destroys. (p. 250)

Devaluation can bring about frustration and confusion that leads to anger and a pattern of reactive behaviour from teens. The model suggests that we respond using the proposed comprehensive steps, and refrain from a reactionary approach. “Kids who turn to gangs are reaching out desperately for a sense of community, wherever they can find it . . .” (p. 195). Readers are reminded to query the impact of seemingly insignificant everyday cultural practices on the experiences of individuals and families. Race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and other dimensions of diversity are always part of our interactions. Rather than merely listing case studies or focusing on such environmental factors as video games or access to guns, Hardy and Laszloffy provide a window into the complex elements affecting teens who harm themselves or others.

For many practitioners, their treatment methodology overlooks important matters of ethnicity and culture of origin. This book challenges the reader to review our values, “to see the connections that exist among all things, which begins with looking closely at ourselves and recognizing the tension that sometimes exists between our beliefs and our behaviours” (p. 268). The book will trigger very important self-analyses for practitioners working with at-risk youth and violence. One example would be for us to explore or reflect on to what extent we use common rationalizations to justify our own violence.

This book challenges the reader to recognize several critical points when working with violent and at-risk youth. For example, we are reminded that when working with gang-involved youth, we

should be mindful that we are supporting the individual and not the gang personification. Creative approaches such as the Validation, Challenging, and Requesting (VCR) methodology could effectively counteract devaluation if used by adults as a tool to initiate dialogue with teens about complex and potentially volatile issues. It is a way to affirm the positive aspects of a teen's behaviour and personality. This is a good example of constructive, strength-based methodology for working with at-risk youth.

This book expands the dialogue so that therapy and/or clinical interventions are not seen as being restricted to conversations about a particular problem that someone may be experiencing. There should be some opportunity to talk about broader issues in the therapy relationship; otherwise, the conversations may not be acknowledging significant realms of experience. The information represents a giant step forward in the understanding of the psychological, familial, and sociocultural factors that contribute to adolescent violence. Hardy and Laszloffy present this timely, innovative treatment approach as a holistic effort that is not patronizing toward youth and their families. This book will prove to be an invaluable tool for practitioners—it is now required reading for all clinical staff that work in my service.