

Social Psychology of Gangs

An Intergroup Communication Perspective

DaJung Woo, Howard Giles,
Michael A. Hogg, and Liran Goldman

Social Identity and Communication Processes in and Between Groups

Until recently, most research on gangs has been grounded in the disciplines of criminology, sociology, and public policy (McGloin and Decker 2010), drawing on theoretical frameworks such as cultural deviance (Cureton 2002), social networks (Bolden 2014; Papachristos, Hureau, and Braga 2013; see chapter 9 in this volume), social disorganization (Sampson and Groves 1989), and social capital (Bursik 2002). In contrast, social psychological research on gangs is extremely limited (see, however, Alleyne and Wood 2012; Thornberry et al. 2003; Vasquez, Lickel, and Hennigan 2010; Wood and Giles 2014) with perhaps the exception of social learning theory (Bandura 1973, 1977) and its applications (e.g., Kissner and Pyrooz 2009; Winfree, Bäckström, and Mays 1994; see chapter 7 in this volume). There has also been a very modest contribution from research in the discipline of communication science research (Conquergood 1994).

Most research has attempted to pinpoint the most important factors leading people to join a gang (see chapter 13 in this volume). However, no single factor by itself can fully explain gang membership (Alleyne and Wood 2010; Esbensen et al. 2010; Howell and Egley 2005; Klein and Maxson 2006; see also Short 1998; Thornberry et al. 2003). In recognition of this, this chapter focuses on social psychological processes that may be operating when youth decide to join a gang. Our intention is to provide insights on mechanisms that link macro-level risk factors (e.g., environment or community-level) and individual psychological and communicative factors. That is, while understanding macro-level risk factors helps us identify why minors may become involved in gangs and who is at the greatest risks for joining them, they are neither sufficient nor necessary conditions for their involvement in gang membership. Obviously, not all children who are exposed to some or many of these risk factors turn to gangs. Consequently, a better understanding of complementary group and intergroup processes that play a role in a young person's decision to join

a gang is critical, especially to explicate why and how these factors can lead some youth to become gang members and others to pursue alternative options.

We build closely on an article by Goldman, Giles, and Hogg (2014) to focus on the role played by social identity and intergroup processes in promoting affiliation with gangs (cf. Alonso 2004; Garot 2010; Hennigan and Spanovic 2012). In doing so, our goal is to better understand why youth find gang membership appealing, when joining other prosocial groups can provide them with similar psychological and identity-related benefits. To achieve this goal, this chapter pivots on three major topics of discussion.

First, we argue that gang membership can be an alternative attractive option for youth who lack a clear sense of their social identity and are marginalized by their peers or community. Second, we focus on important communication processes such as how gang members express and promote their group identity and membership, how communication of others' expectations and perceptions about gangs can influence their decision to join a gang, and how gang images can be glamorized and promoted through media exposure (see chapter 13 in this volume). Third, we discuss how and why gangs engage in intergroup social comparison processes and prefer social dominance as a way to achieve a clear group identity, higher status, and power. Lastly, we provide a summary, outline implications for preventing youth from turning to gangs, and sketch some future research directions.

Our focus, given the authors' locales, is primarily on North American youth, inviting the key question of why youth are attracted to gangs and violent gang behaviors. Gang violence is a very significant and a costly blight in many cities and increasing numbers of rural areas around the world (Decker and Pyrooz 2010; Esbensen and Maxson 2012). We contextualize our case by referring to relevant statistics on and examples of gangs; but our goal is not to provide a comprehensive survey of gangs, as many excellent reviews already exist (e.g., Coughlin and Venkatesh 2003; Decker, Melde, and Pyrooz 2013; Wood and Alleyne 2010).

Social Identity and Identification

Social identity theory is a social cognitive theory of group processes, intergroup relations and collective self-conception (e.g., Tajfel and Turner 1979; Turner et al. 1987; see also Abrams and Hogg 2010; Hogg 2006). It defines groups cognitively as collections of individuals who share a common evaluative self-definition – a shared social identity. There is an emphasis on both the cognitive process of identifying with a group and on the various corollaries of belonging to a group.

It is the cognitive process of social categorization that causes people to define themselves and others as members of social groups as well as to perceive themselves and others in group prototypical terms. Categorizing self and others leads one to perceive and evaluate self and others in terms of the prototypical attributes that define the relevant ingroup or outgroup. Group prototypes tend not only to capture intragroup or within-group similarities, but also accentuate intergroup or between-group differences on relevant dimensions and, thus, make groups and their social identities distinctive.

Together, these constructs and processes form the foundation for one central assumption of social identity theory: obtaining or maintaining a favorable and well-defined self-concept or social identity motivates behavior. Hence, individuals have a desire and tendency to define their self-concept in terms of their group memberships. The goal of both individuals and the collective is to strive for evaluatively positive distinctiveness, oftentimes (as illustrated later) manifest in terms of linguistic and/or communication differentiation (Giles

1978). From this perspective, why youth join gangs can be explained, in the main, as a motivated response to two major conditions: having an unfavorable identity, or feeling uncertain about one's identity.

Among the risk factors associated with youth susceptibility to gang involvement (e.g., Howell and Egley 2005), poor family relationships and limited school- or community-based social bonding relate to issues of identity – or more specifically a lack of identity. When non-gang youth and young adults were asked to identify key features of gang members, many perceived, and maybe misconstrued, gang members as helpless beings, struggling to find a place to belong in society (Lafontaine, Acoose, and Schissel 2009). When youth do not have strong relationships at home, school, or with their community, they can lack a distinct identity, often including a sense of solidarity with a shared family identity (e.g., Soliz and Rittenour 2012). As a result, they turn to gangs for companionship and a sense of family and cultural enrichment and, thus, construct a more satisfying social identity (Alleyne and Wood 2010; Blakemore and Blakemore 1998; Sánchez-Jankowski 2003; Stretesky and Pogrebin 2007).

Able to fill this void, gangs offer adolescents a much-needed sense of belonging. Because of their vulnerable age, youth are especially susceptible to the appeal of what gangs have to offer: a peer group of which they can be a part, a clear personal and social identity, increased autonomy from parents or guardians, a “path to manhood” (albeit violent) for males, and the means by which to improve their social status (Taylor 2009). A similar social identity argument (Hogg, Siegel, and Hohman 2011) has been developed for why adolescents may identify with adolescent groups that engage in behaviors that put their health and even life at risk (e.g., groups whose identity is defined by drug use or binge drinking). That is, joining a gang can offer the sense of belongingness that family, school, and community may not always provide for at-risk youth. Thus, violent gang behaviors per se are not the primary attraction for youth to join a gang, but the allure of being able to fill the identity-void can be a stronger factor, propelling young people to become involved in a gang, which eventually can lead to risky and criminal behaviors (e.g., Wood 2014).

Those who are marginalized may experience more of a lack of identity and youth may feel marginalized for a variety of reasons. Frustrations over marginality may come from being an ethnic minority (Krohn et al. 2011), being economically disadvantaged (Vigil 2003), or from being physically marginalized through geographic location (Ralphs, Medina, and Aldridge 2009). No matter the source, marginalized youth experience difficulties integrating within their community. This leaves them struggling to find somewhere they belong (Lafontaine et al. 2009) and to construct a meaningful and validated identity in society. Research suggests perceptions and messages of marginalization (i.e., people's belief that they are not fully assimilated within or accepted by the group) can play a role in motivating youth to join gangs. People who struggle with feelings of marginalization have difficulty establishing an identity and tend to have lower levels of self-esteem. Hence again and for marginalized youth, joining a gang can be appealing as it provides such youth with a valued identity (Krohn et al. 2011; Sánchez-Jankowski 2003).

Further, the concept of social identity refers to the personally significant groups to which individuals belong (Fisher, Haslam, and Smith 2010). Because people maintain multiple identities, the social identity that is significant depends on the particular identity that is salient at any particular time, which provides the most gratifying experience for them. The emergence of different identities can be contingent upon circumstances the individual is experiencing, or how accessible that identity is in the individual's mind (Hogg 2006). For youth who live in communities where gangs are prevalent and socially available, the salience

of gangs may be especially high. As the sociologist and philosopher Hacking (1986) explains, people cannot be what they do not know exists, and they come to fit socially constructed categories, because they have to choose an existing identity within extant social reality. Therefore, joining a gang is not only the most salient identity solution for youth who live in communities with high gang activities, but it also may be one of the few options they have for achieving a social identity at all.

However, as Cloward and Ohlin (1995) argue, this is not to say that having the options and being exposed to the gang life would automatically lead youth to become gang members, because access to the environment alone would not be sufficient for actually achieving gang membership and performing the role of a gang member, just as it is for prosocial behaviors (e.g., being around and motivated to become a physician does not make one become a physician). Our argument is that youth are more susceptible and likely to choose the option of joining a gang when they are surrounded by the available means and opportunities to become a gang member and they are also struggling with lack of clear identity at the same time.

Another way to explain why some youth are prone to joining gangs is uncertainty. According to uncertainty-identity theory, circumstances that elicit feelings of uncertainty, particularly related to or influencing self-conception, can motivate identity-related behavior (Hogg 2012, 2014). In other words, perceptions of uncertainty regarding issues that are relevant to self can motivate people to reduce (albeit not under all circumstances) that uncertainty (see also Afifi 2010; Afifi and Afifi 2009). As a way to reduce the uncertainty, they will be more likely to attempt to belong to a group that would offer them a sense of identity with meaningful and clear boundaries.

Specifically, turning to a group reduces uncertainty by providing a better conception of one's social world, and providing a script for how one should behave and communicate (Hogg 2012). The future may seem bleak and uncertain for youth who have few social ties, are low achievers at school, come from a broken home, live in poverty or in economically struggling communities, feel unsafe in their neighborhood, or live in an abusive and violent household. Any one of these circumstances can be unnerving – and this is not an exhaustive list. The youth who are most vulnerable to joining a gang oftentimes experience many of these conditions (Del Carmen et al. 2009; Rizzo 2003).

The more uncertain one is about one's social identity, the greater the probability that one will seek a group that is high in entitativity, where entitativity is that property of a group that makes it appear to have clear boundaries, internal homogeneity, tight social interaction, clear internal structure, common goals, and common fate (Campbell 1958; Hamilton and Sherman 1996). Just as levels of identity can vary, so can the degree of entitativity; low-entitativity groups appear as a loose aggregate, while high-entitativity groups appear as a distinct and cohesive unit (see Hughes 2013). Tests of uncertainty-identity theory have shown that, when people's social identity-related uncertainty is elevated, they prefer to identify strongly with more highly entitative groups (see Hogg 2012, 2014).

Gangs are an excellent example of highly entitative groups in that they provide a distinctive and clearly defined personal and social identity (Taylor 2009). Ultra-entitative or "extreme groups," such as gangs and terrorist organizations, would be more appealing and attractive when individuals feel uncertain, because they provide individuals with a more rigidly defined, highly prescriptive social identity (Hogg, Meehan, and Farquharson 2010; see chapter 16 in this volume). While individuals experiencing uncertainty may already be inclined toward high-entitativity groups, extreme groups can be especially appealing under conditions of severe and enduring conditions of uncertainty, such as economic collapse, cultural

disintegration, unemployment, divorce, or general uncertainties associated with adolescence. Because of this, identifying with a group is effective in reducing uncertainty as this identification outlines what to think and feel as well as how to behave and communicate.

While entitativity refers to the structure of a group rather than the group's behaviors, the process of self-categorization that reduces self-uncertainty through group identification with high-entitativity groups readily accounts for much of the group's behavior. Self-categorization depersonalizes self-conception such that one conforms to group norms; it assigns group normative attributes – including behaviors – to self and thus causes people to behave in line with the group's norms (e.g., Abrams and Hogg 1990; Turner et al. 1987) and communicate those norms with others (Hogg and Giles 2012). If the group's norms prescribe antisocial and aggressive behaviors, then this process of self-categorization-based depersonalization will cause people to behave antisocially and aggressively (Postmes et al. 2001; Reicher, Spears, and Postmes 1995).

Behaviors that are generated by group identification based on self-categorization include ethnocentrism, conformity, cohesion, stereotyping, intergroup competition, and discrimination (Hogg et al. 2007). Because behaviors depend, to some degree, on the social identity that is salient (Fisher et al. 2010), gang members are especially likely to act and communicatively express themselves in accord with the norms of their group (Hogg and Giles 2012). These normative acts are, for gangs, typically characterized by aggression and violence (Wood 2014; see also Pyrooz, Moule, and Decker 2014).

Further, Hogg and colleagues (2010) have provided evidence showing that people become motivated to identify strongly with a group that can be relied upon to remove or buffer threats that are posed to their security, prosperity, or lifestyle. The types of groups that can serve these needs most effectively are highly distinctive groups, which can be radical and extreme groups that have forceful behavioral agendas (Hogg 2012). That is, for gang members, the perceived “emotional protection” is earned by being part of the gang and following the extreme group behaviors and norms, which decreases their fears caused by any prevailing threats. Gang members, then, can enjoy greater “peace of mind” (Melde, Taylor, and Ebsensen 2009).

However, behaviors do not depend entirely on the salience of specific social identities. Generally, people are willing to exhibit behaviors they feel will somehow benefit them. For example, a series of studies that examined motivations to participate in collective behavior found that when people participate in collective action to promote the welfare of their group, they experience the added benefit of individual enhancement (Tropp and Brown 2004). Similarly, in a study on emotions and collective action (Becker, Tausch, and Wagner 2011), researchers found that participating in collective action brought self-directed positive affect, while creating outgroup-directed anger and contempt. In other words, doing something on behalf of, and communicating forcibly and visibly about, one's group helps people feel better about themselves *as individuals*. Further, in Tropp and Brown's (2004) study, it was also found that the more that group membership was relevant and salient, the extent to which group members promoted and represented their group was associated with how positively they evaluated themselves. This suggests that members who strongly identify with their respective gang will feel that they personally benefit from activities they engage in when defending the gang.

Eventually, identifying as a gang member becomes a permanent part of social awareness for those who become involved in gangs. After joining a gang, the group's views become central to the individual's life, shaping their identity and personality (Decker and Van Winkle 1996; Moore 1978; Stretesky and Pogrebin 2007). In this sense, joining a gang is

more than acquiring a group membership – it becomes the core identity of gang members, even if they try to keep self and group separate.

Thus far, we have discussed why young people join gangs, focusing on social identity, identification, and categorization processes. Let us now ask what happens when gang members develop strong identification after joining a gang. One of the key concepts that characterize gang membership is loyalty. When gang members become strongly identified with the group, they are willing to remain members despite the high personal cost (e.g., higher chance of being a victim of violence). Also, they are willing to forgo attractive alternatives to membership in the gang.

Research by Van Vugt and Hart (2004) shows that when identification with a group is strong, individuals see themselves overwhelmingly as group members – the self is saturated by the group's identity. This may explain why gang members engage in violent and even irrational group behaviors; being part of a group influences who they are, and the self and group start to merge and ultimately become “fused” such that the autonomous individual self disappears. However, when identification with a group is weak, individuals see themselves more as unique individuals. This argument parallels with Pyrooz, Sweeten, and Piquero's (2013) finding that, when gang members are highly embedded in their gang, constraining forces may increase, but their involvement in gangs would only continue compared to those who were weakly embedded in their gangs and tend to desist at a faster rate.

If someone's group promotes certain behavioral norms – such as drive-by-shootings for gang members – they will be more likely to participate in those normative behaviors than if they do not identify strongly with the group, or if those particular behaviors were not normative of the group (Decker 1996; see also Hogg and Giles 2012; Hogg and Smith 2007; chapter 15 in this volume). Because gangs feel that violence is necessary to gain respect and establish their reputation as a group that ought to be feared (LAPD 2014), it is especially easy for outsiders and new members to view the group's norm as pivoting strongly on antisocial and aggressive behaviors (see Emler and Reicher 1995).

Thus, while drinking, drug use, vandalizing property, bullying people, robbing designated targets, participating in drive-by-shootings, or using weapons in any other capacity may be viewed as antisocial and aggressive behaviors, such divergent behaviors can create and *communicate* a sense of structure for some individuals. This thereby reduces uncertainty and fosters a valued identification with the group (see Abrams, O'Connor, and Giles 2001) that can conceal any sense of shame (see Travaglino et al. 2014).

Communicating Social Identity

In this section, we emphasize the importance of communication, specifically the messages communicated by, among, and to gang members. Gangs communicate their identity in specific ways, such as by tattoos or other physical signs that carry meanings. Flores (2013) calls these malleable, physical markings of gang life *soft embodiment*, as opposed to individuals' permanent characteristics or expressions (i.e., hard embodiment) such as aggressive voice tones. Yet, physical signs or soft embodiment are only one of the many ways in which the important aspects of communication are revealed in gang behaviors and activities. In this section, our discussion focuses on four topics related to communication: (1) communicating gang identity and activities; (2) communicating loyalty and commitment through socialization; (3) communicating adults' expectations to youth; and (4) the influence of media on youths' aspiration for gang membership.

Communicating Gang Identity and Activities

A gang identity is reinforced through the clothes members wear, the company they keep, and the activities they participate in, which tend to be exclusionary in nature. For example, members identify their gang membership specifically by gang names such as Bloods, Crips, Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), Latin Kings, Texas Syndicates, and so forth. In order to communicate and accentuate their identity-related pride, members dress in particular styles, adorn themselves with tattoos that identify their particular gang, and use graffiti to mark their “turf” or territory. Even behaviors (such as the type of violence members typically engage in) can differ depending on the particular gang (LAPD 2014). These acts and behaviors are highly communicative in nature, which helps organize the gang’s systems and structures in intergroup settings by protecting, maintaining, and enhancing the gang’s valued distinctiveness and perceived power (see later). It is important to recognize, however, that while there are common underlying patterns, each gang has unique features, organizational structures, histories, and so forth (Decker, Katz, and Webb 2008; Densley 2014).

Because gangs advertise affiliation communicatively through graffiti or by wearing certain hats, earrings, gym shoes, and even finger nail colors (Blakemore and Blakemore 1998; Densley 2012; Gambetta 2009), individuals who live in the same areas as gang members may find that they constantly need to be aware of where they go, what they wear, or even what they say. In fact, the identity and behavior of residents in gang-pervaded communities are significantly influenced by a “street code,” which is the youth culture’s informal but well-known expression for social-structural community characteristics (Kubrin 2005). Street code embodies messages that guide interpersonal public behavior, articulate norms, and describe social relations in the local neighborhood (see Hogg and Giles 2012); failure to know or adhere to this code can have life-or-death consequences, particularly for young people (Anderson 1999; Stewart and Simons 2010).

Violence can be a way to communicate gang identity to other gangs and communities. Acting violently can send the message that gang members are not to be messed with and are capable of doing anything, which helps them enhance their reputation, status, and command respect from gang-peers (Melde et al. 2009; Stretesky and Pogrebin 2007). Kubrin’s (2005) analysis of the street code showed that violence was considered to be the most critical resource and tool to gain status and respect among those who participate in street culture (see Alleyne, Fernandes, and Pritchard 2014; Wood 2014). Figuratively, Papachristos (2009) compares violence to a “gift” that demands reciprocation if accepted, and explains that those who reciprocate violence would be able to maintain their reputation and honor. That is, in addition to external and material signals and signs they use for street code, their activities and behaviors can contribute to communicating their social identity.

Another way that communication plays a role in gang activities is through the use of *euphemistic language*, or language that sanitizes their behaviors, in relation to gangs’ dehumanization (Haslam 2006) and moral disengagement processes (Bandura et al. 1996). Gang members engage in these processes in which outgroup members and victims are viewed as non-human beings and, therefore, not deserving of treatment as a human. These techniques are also employed to neutralize dissonance (Alleyne and Wood 2010) and justify their criminal activities. In doing so, gang members’ uses of euphemistic language are frequently observed.

Gang members use euphemistic language in several ways when they engage in dehumanization and moral disengagement (Alleyne et al. 2014; Sykes and Matza 1957; Wood 2014). They refer to “killing humans” as “killing animals” or “not killing, but a war,” and in other

times gang members call murder a “business” or “mission.” Also, they may use *advantageous comparisons* to compare their actions to worse situations so as to distract from the severity of their behaviors.

Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory (ELIT) becomes relevant here in that it focuses on language use and communicative outcomes as integral to, and sometimes a defining feature of, group identity (e.g., Cargile, Giles, and Clément 1996; Giles and Johnson 1981, 1987). The theory originally focused on interethnic relations, but it is relevant to all other intergroup situations where communication and messages are fundamental to the workings of social identity (Giles 2012; Reid and Giles 2005) and the expression of strong ingroup vitality (Wood and Giles 2014). In this framework, gang members’ use of euphemistic language and communication of their violent behaviors (e.g., normalizing gang activities or being a member of the gang that commits criminal acts) can be seen as a way to construct and communicatively manage their social identity.

Communicating Loyalty and Commitment Through Socialization

Proving one’s loyalty, commitment, and ability is common to many groups. To join a sports team, potential players must succeed at tryouts. To join a fraternity or sorority, potential members must “pledge” themselves and, in many cases, survive the hazing process. To get a job, potential employees must be convincing in their interviews that they can contribute to the organization. This process is no different for gangs (see chapter 13 in this volume). To be an official gang member, courage, honor, and loyalty to the gang must be proven (Alleyne and Wood 2010; Decker and Curry 2002; Stretesky and Pogrebin 2007). Relatedly, and in line with the foregoing, the ritual initiation of gang members, or being “jumped in,” explicitly involves established members of the group beating the inductees for a brief period, thereby signaling or communicatively extending the message that violence is a core element of the group (Densley 2012; Gambetta 2009; Vigil 2008).

The major difference between, on the one hand, sports teams, fraternities and sororities, and businesses that are more inclined to resolve disputes via formal and legal channels of authority and gangs, on the other, is their use of extremely violent behavior for their group socialization process. So why does the use of violence not deter potential gang members? Focusing on violent initiations, research on group socialization has shown that extreme initiation rites bind people who have freely chosen to undergo the initiation to groups more strongly than do mild initiations (e.g., Levine and Moreland 1994). Focusing on the norms of violence and aggression that prevail in gangs, research on social marginalization has shown that when group members are not yet fully accepted or they are on the periphery of the group, they may be more likely than other individuals to strenuously promote the standards of the group. While it is possible that peripheral group status can lead people to deviate from a group, it can also motivate people to more actively attempt to satisfy the norms of the group (Breakwell 1979; Jetten et al. 2003; Noel, Wann, and Branscombe 1995) in order to achieve full membership.

A potential explanation for what separates those who are willing to participate in gang violence from those who are not is the future they see for themselves in the group. In line with Tropp and Brown’s (2004) aforementioned findings that people are willing to exhibit behaviors they feel will somehow benefit them, peripheral group members are especially willing to display their loyalty to their group when they believe they will be fully accepted by their group (Goldman and Hogg 2014; Jetten et al. 2003). Under these circumstances,

they will not only display group-oriented behaviors, but will tailor their behavior to communicate their loyalty and maximize their social advantage. That is, whatever behaviors that are perceived to be typical of the group and status-enhancing, peripheral group members will participate in those behaviors, oftentimes more zealously than prototypical, deeply embedded group members (e.g., Hughes 2013; Sweeten, Pyrooz, and Piquero 2013).

Peripheral members believe that, in doing so, they are communicating a clear message proving that they will be “good” group members (Jetten, Branscombe, and Spears 2002). In fact, peripheral group members appear to be more likely than prototypical members to use aggression as a way to improve their status within the group (Breakwell 1979; Noel et al. 1995). According to the social marginalization literature, newcomers typically feel more pressure to assimilate to the group and its culture and to alter their behaviors and communication patterns so as to conform to those of the group (see Giles, Bonilla, and Speer 2012). In other words, they must prove their loyalty to the group (Goldman and Hogg 2014) and align with its code of honor (Travaglino et al. 2014).

Continuing our discussion of group socialization, social identification is the central psychological process as the concept of socialization relates to the way individuals are transformed into group members, whatever the nature of the group involved. If socialization certainly applies to the child who is learning to become an acceptable member of his or her society, it is also relevant to the process of becoming a student, a priest, a criminal, a terrorist, and a man or a woman. Individuals have to learn the norms, beliefs, values, and ways of behaving and communicating that are shared by other members of the group (Guimond 2000).

Promoting the group’s behaviors can yield additional benefits beyond the self-fulfillment people enjoy from becoming a fully accepted group member. Peripheral group members who anticipated becoming more prototypical display higher collective self-esteem (Jetten et al. 2002). When the group’s identity becomes a central component of an individual’s identity, the individual assumes and communicates other aspects of the group as well, such as collective self-esteem. It is possible that whatever the motivation for joining a gang – whether it is low self-esteem or low bonding or attachment at home, at school, or in the community – gang violence is integral to the life of gangs (Decker 1996; Decker and Van Winkle 1996; Densley 2014) and may seem a very *small* cost for the benefit of inclusion and a sense of belonging.

Communicating Adults’ Expectations to Youth

Youth can be, and can feel, marginalized for many social and economic reasons as discussed earlier in this chapter. However, evidence suggests that it is public perceptions that may contribute most strongly to feelings of marginalization. Swetnam and Pope (2001) asked students, teachers, and city police department employees to discuss their perceptions of gangs. When specifically asked to discuss how gangs have impacted their community, students were uncertain whether gangs were causing problems within the community. All the adults, on the other hand, agreed that gangs were a problem. These data suggest that adults may be reacting to their *perceptions* of gangs rather than the reality of what gangs are (or are not) doing. Decker and Kempf-Leonard (1991) also provided empirical evidence that there is little agreement on the prevalence and severity of gang activities, even among people involved in the “gang effort” such as the police and Task Forces, pointing out the lack of a theoretically robust definition of gang and gang activity (see chapter 2 in this volume).

In a similar vein, Wade and Stafford (2003) compared perceptions of gang presence of students and teachers in schools with uniform policies and without them. It emerged that, while students' perceptions of gang presence did not vary across schools with and without uniform policies, teachers from schools with uniform policies did perceive significantly lower levels of gang presence than teachers from schools without uniform policies. This suggests that adults may be more susceptible to and rely on external markers of gang membership as reviewed earlier (e.g., graffiti or clothing), and not necessarily on the actual gang members' presence and behaviors. These data also suggest that teachers' communication with students can be influenced by how teachers perceive students' visible signs of "problems," which could contribute to marginalization of at-risk youth in schools.

Importantly, whether adults realize it or not, their personal beliefs and perceptions can have a direct impact on youth. Drawing from focus groups and interviews, Ralphs et al. (2009) discovered how perceptions of marginalization impacted youth living in inner-city areas affected by gangs. Youth from these communities reported how their teachers often predicted they "would end up a 'drug dealer,' a 'gang member' or 'dead'" (494). These assertions were based solely on knowing where these children lived. Such communicated expectations can act as a self-fulfilling prophecy, contributing to low aspirations and limited goals that, in turn, diminish the opportunities youth have or seek out. When youth hear that their future is bleak as communicated to them by socially significant others, gangs can be an attractive alternative over, say, being a so-called "soccer hooligan" (e.g., Frosdick, Marsh, and Chalmers 2005; Redhead 1987). As will be discussed below, this is even more so if related media images glamorizing gang life enhance such an option.

The Influence of Media on Youths' Aspiration for Gang Membership

Finally here, we address the influence of the media on youth violence and the glamorization of gang membership and lifestyle. Gang-like behaviors, identity-related expressions, and images are depicted in various media, such as films, TV shows, video games, or music. For instance, gang films depicting characters rewarded for gang-like behaviors act as a blueprint for young aspiring gang members. Consequently, youth may adapt, modify, or discard their existing social controls in favor of what they perceive as the attractive or even glamorous attributes of gang membership.

Music, especially rap lyrics, also often communicates gangs' "street codes" or urban street violence (see Giles, Hajda, and Hamilton 2009). Kubrin's (2005) analysis of rap lyrics revealed that street code, whether communicated through music or interaction on the streets, not only constructs schemas of the "gangster identity," but also provides listeners with justification for the use of violence. The most common themes referenced in the music assessed were respect and violence – a heady mix that tends to characterize (sub)cultures of honor more broadly (e.g., Cohen and Nisbett 1997).

Thus, gang's "street code" as it is conveyed by rap lyrics serves as a schema by identifying and describing violent identity and behavior. While violence and aggression are not the only behaviors that characterize gang identity and activities, data suggest that they are one of the main characteristics projected in gang-related media. Relatedly, many studies confirm the influence of violent televisions, films, video games, and music on increasing the likelihood of aggressive and violent behaviors in both immediate and long-term contexts (e.g., Anderson et al. 2003).

However, a study conducted by Miranda and Claes (2004) shows that youth can give importance to certain media content, and the degree to which a specific media genre influences youth's deviant behaviors and gang activities can differ. Their study explored the relationships between French-Canadian adolescents' preference for four different rap music genres (American rap, gangsta/hardcore rap, hip hop/soul, and French rap) and five types of self-reported deviant behaviors such as drug use and street gang involvement (see chapter 11 in this volume), controlling for other relevant variables. While the results showed that, overall, rap music was significantly connected to deviant behaviors, the nature of the relationships were different; adolescents' preference for French rap music was significantly linked to violence, street gang involvement, and mild drug use, while their preference for gangsta/hardcore rap was more significantly connected to theft. Hip hop/soul was linked to lower rates of deviant behaviors, perhaps due to its frequent uses of educative and positive messages, according to the researchers. Thus, they suggested the use of prosocial rap music for protecting some adolescents from deviant behaviors.

In sum, membership in gangs has been idealized and romanticized in media and pop culture (e.g., music), painting an image of gangs that is magnetic and attractive. Yet, having joined a gang, members are quite aware of the reality that involvement in gangs is dangerous, even deadly. At the same time, members have expressed feelings that if they were *not* members of a gang, they would face the same threats of danger, but without the solidarity or protection provided by their affiliation with a gang (Del Carmen et al. 2009). It seems that portrayals of gangs in the media may spark adolescents' interest and motivation to join gangs as a way of anticipatory socialization, and those who already join gangs soon learn the reality.

Social Comparison and Dominance

"There is no room for the two of us. It's either Eighteen or MS." The above quote is an answer from a member of Eighteen, one of the most notorious gangs in Central America, when asked, "*Why* are they [MS] your enemy?" in a BBC documentary. His statement suggests the desire for gangs to be recognized as the "better one" than any other gang. Gangs can achieve this recognition in different ways, but as one former gang member explains, "It ain't about who is the prettiest, who got the most money. It's about who the hardest is. You know what I mean? Who the toughest is, who got the most shooters." This underscores the central role of intergroup dynamics and communication in tensions between and among gangs.

Social comparison describes how groups and their members compare themselves on group prototypical dimensions to make the ingroup seem not only distinctive from but also evaluatively superior to a relevant outgroup. Identity, status, and power can all influence gang membership, especially through intergroup social comparison processes. Intragroup, or within-group, dynamics can also impact gang membership (Hogg and Gaffney 2014; Hogg and Tindale 2005). Prototype-based intragroup social comparisons help to establish a member's position (more central or more peripheral) within their group.

Gangs aspire to enhance or reinforce their status in comparison to other gangs in terms of the criteria or systems that are arbitrarily set by gangs in the same area. They can compete for a higher number of criminal activities or illegal resources such as bragging rights, members, turf, market share, and profits, and ultimately desire to be recognized as "the hardest." 20-Gauge, one of the first members or "originators" of the Lincoln Park Bloods in San

Diego, explained that it was their gang who introduced cocaine to the city of San Diego, and it made them feel very proud of their gang affiliation.

The desire for respect has been cited as a major influence on youth's decisions to join a gang (Blakemore and Blakemore 1998; King, Walpole, and Lamon 2007; Sánchez-Jankowski 2003). Indeed, as in cultures of honor in general (Cohen and Nisbett 1997; Travaglino et al. 2014), respect is a central currency for gangs – the dynamics of respect play a key role in adherence to street code (Anderson 1999) and in the business of selling drugs (Bourgois 2003). Because of the social power associated with gangs, it is common for youth to look up to and aspire to be members to gain such levels of respect (Alleyne and Wood 2010).

The reason why status is so important for youth is that they can fulfill their self-enhancement goal through achieving positive social identity, which is, as argued above, a key motivation underlying social identity processes and intergroup and communicative behaviors. Thus, they strive to join groups they believe have positive distinctiveness and status in a particular context. If they become part of and are identified with such groups, the status, prestige, and social valence of the group become magnetically attached to them. Gang membership can be appealing in this way, especially to youth, because achievement of higher status is often associated with earning respect (Alleyne and Wood 2010), and respect within gangs is fostered through participation in violence and possessing the power to coerce others.

Achieving power can include threats and use of force and violence (Knox 1994), and the possession of power can facilitate and motivate the intention to act (Galinsky, Gruenfeld, and Magee 2003). Also, because research has shown that those who view status as important are more likely to bully others to achieve higher status (South and Wood 2006) – and bullying is associated with gang membership (Wood, Moir, and James 2009) – those who place greater value on status may be more drawn toward gang membership. Further, research by Fast, Halevy, and Galinsky (2012) suggests that those who gain a sense of power through gang membership are more likely to turn to destructive and violent behaviors. Elevated perceived respect can improve members' self-esteem, evaluation of their social identity, and groups' status in comparison to how they perceive other relevant outgroups.

Discussions with former and current gang members further revealed a critical component of respect: identity. Specifically, male gang members are especially protective of their male identity and believe that they have been “disrespected” if their masculinity is challenged (Stretesky and Pogrebin 2007). As in other cultures of honor (Travaglino et al. 2014), respect plays a key role, and perceived insults to masculinity can readily provoke aggression (Cohen et al. 1996). Each individual member's manhood as well as his reputation reflects on the group as a whole. Thus, threats to one member's identity are viewed as challenges to the gang's collective identity (Stretesky and Pogrebin 2007). As Kubrin's (2005) analysis of popular rap lyrics revealed, retaliation when a gang member has been disrespected is not just an option, “payback is a must” (see Vasquez et al. 2010).

This is relevant to the concept of social dominance, which is described as individuals' preference for inequality and group dominance. People with a high social dominance orientation prefer hierarchical group structures, and perceive intergroup aggression as necessary or even as a survival mechanism for their success (Pratto et al. 1994). Because the majority of gang members are young men and they are likely to have been influenced by hegemonic masculine characteristics such as dominance and aggressiveness, gang members can be seen as high in social dominance (see Densley, Cai, and Hilal 2014).

It can be argued that gang members can benefit from dominant and aggressive behaviors such as threatening others, because threats can reinforce collective identity and group

cohesion (Alleyne and Wood 2010). By threatening others and using violent actions against them, the gang's evaluation on their prototypical dimension – power, respect, and status – becomes higher; they can achieve group solidarity, and they see their ingroup as superior in comparison to outgroups or other gangs. Of course, behavioral reactions to others' threatening of their social identity depend, in part, on whether or not a *salient* social identity was threatened. Fisher et al.'s (2010) research provides evidence that, when a salient social or group identity is threatened, communicative responses are more likely to be aggressive and retaliatory. Then, threats made against gangs can produce volatile situations, because gang identity is a salient and dominant social identity for them.

Drawing again on ELIT, groups are continually making intergroup comparisons in terms of what and how messages are being conveyed (Goldman et al. 2014). To do this, gangs may use social media sites and the Internet to engage in gang activities and to exhibit and promote criminal behaviors (see Pyrooz, Decker, and Moule 2013). For example, one of the local gangs in Santa Barbara, California, crafted and uploaded a video to YouTube, which shows their multi-generational group rapping against the backdrop of the city's historic and central locations. The message they attempted to send out to other gangs (and perhaps the community at large) was that they had a robust family culture and that they could craft such an aesthetic product (making a sophisticated and engaging rap video on the Internet) without any real civic or legal repercussions. At this time, they attacked and murdered a member of the other gang right outside an upscale department store in the center of busy downtown Santa Barbara.

The perceived ingroup vitality that such actions conveyed cannot be underestimated, and doubtlessly, it had a chilling effect on other gangs' sense of their own vitality. Hence, gangs are continually making intergroup social comparisons on vitality dimensions (see Giles, Bourhis, and Taylor 1977; Reid and Giles 2010) about their cultural portrayals, demographics, and the explicitness of geographical boundaries. It comes as no wonder, then, that overt tagging of another gang's terrain (or even an elite school, viewed as representing authority and the establishment) is a message for all to see of the perpetrators' relative strength and their challenge of the geographical boundaries of outgroup gangs.

Conclusions

We have tried to understand why youth join antisocial groups such as gangs when the same benefits can be gained through membership of other groups *and* when there are significantly greater risks involved in joining gangs. Our argument is centered on the dynamics of social identity, especially the lack of an adequate identity and identity uncertainty. We also discussed how gangs communicate their social identity through the use of symbols and signs, language, and violent activities, as well as how they are influenced by communication of others' expectations and perceptions, including the media. Lastly, we explored youths', gangs', and gang members' social comparison processes and propensity for social dominance.

What we have covered here is only, of course, a subset of factors that sponsor participation in gangs. It could be that youth knowingly join such extreme groups merely as a matter of circumstance (see Grabowski and Stohl 2010). For example, fraternities and sororities offer members improved status and pleasurable experiences, but such groups are typically more accessible to middle- and upper-class individuals. Gangs, however, may serve a parallel opportunity for poor and low-income youth (Sánchez-Jankowski 2003). Other than this particular example of social class, a variety of circumstances can propel an individual

with the need to affiliate with a group (including those from elite backgrounds who feel disenfranchised from their values).

Circumstance and why youth join certain groups may be different, but different groups can fulfill individuals' needs and desires in similar ways. For instance, gang members are able to obtain a sense of *family* and belonging through their affiliation with a gang (e.g., Vigil 2007). They call each other "brothers" and are committed to protecting each other. Their identity is reinforced through the clothes they wear, the company they keep, and the activities in which they participate. In a similar way, members of a fraternity or sorority call each other brothers or sisters, participate in social activities, have specific dress codes for certain events to signal their membership, and share exclusionary rituals.

An important difference between gangs and other groups such as Greek organizations, sports teams, and other social groups may be that gang members' activities impact other gang members and the wider community, especially in terms of risks associated with their behaviors. Thus, efforts to minimize the appeal of gangs are needed and have been implemented not only for at-risk youth, but also for the community and society. Policymakers, law enforcement, and other social agencies have approached the task of minimizing gang membership by focusing on a spiral of punishment (Rios 2012), and by making gang members feel guilty about participating in gang activities. They have often stressed the notion that certain behaviors should be avoided because of their harmful effects on others (Matsuda et al. 2012), or created programs that educate at-risk youth about negative outcomes of gang membership on themselves, such as the likelihood of becoming victims of violence (Katz et al. 2011; Peterson, Taylor, and Esbensen 2004).

Despite these efforts, at least three explanations can be proposed for why youth may not buy into these techniques of guilt and violent victimization, just as drug prevention programs presenting risks and dangers have backfired (e.g., Brown and Horowitz 1993). First, youth are more likely to care about what their *peers* think than worry about the welfare of the wider community (Matsuda et al. 2012), and even of themselves. For young boys who are at-risk, friendship and brotherhood can be far more important than others' and their own safety. Another explanation is that, even if people recognize and understand the risks and dangers associated with joining a gang, the rewards they earn from getting involved in the family-like culture and protection as well as acquisition of status and power outweighs the claimed harmful effects. Third, it is possible that youth are just particularly adept at identifying inaccuracies and exaggerations shown in programs designed to prevent them from joining gangs (Katz et al. 2011). This might be especially so because they are around peers who are already involved in gangs and they know the realities better than the adults who may rely on popular perceptions of gang and gang membership. Evidence shows that gangs' high homicide rates (over 100 times greater than the general public) do not detract from their appeal when all of a gang member's friends are alive and well (Decker and Pyrooz 2010).

For these reasons, Katz and colleagues (2011) argued that the focus should be on problems associated with gang membership rather than on gangs themselves. We believe that the social psychology and communication literatures, when combined with our understanding of gangs, could further explain the driving forces behind gang membership. Such information can be used to construct more effective interventions and policies aimed at mitigating the desire to join, strengthening communicative resistance to gang recruitment, and/or promoting the desire to leave gangs (see Maxson, Hennigan, and Sloane 2005; Maxson, Matsuda, and Hennigan 2009; chapter 14 in this volume).

Further, we contend that it would be advantageous to focus *not just* on the problems associated with gangs, but on what other groups can offer as alternatives to gang

membership (Goldman et al. 2014). Here, an important implication of this chapter's social psychology and intergroup communication approach for prevention and intervention of youths' gang membership can be drawn. For youth who believe that the only choice they have is joining gangs, whether it is due to family issues, economic struggle, or feelings of powerless, viable alternative groups need to be presented to them as other options. In order for youth to find alternative groups attractive such groups would need to seem entitative, and provide a sense of family belonging, higher status and power, and protection. Such groups might promote activities around conservation, religion, music, or sports. Importantly, in addition to offering other opportunities, members of the public and others need to understand the rich *culture* and family-like capital gang membership can provide, rather than relying on popular, negative images and perceptions of gangs.

Undoubtedly, more needs to be accomplished in both examining the social psychological underpinnings and communicative manifestations of gang membership and in theory building (Wood and Giles 2014), including the process of leaving or "jumping out," from the social identity perspective introduced here (see Pyrooz and Decker 2011; Pyrooz, Decker, and Webb 2014). Recently, Bolden (2014) has shown in San Antonio, Texas, that gang members can have close ties with people outside their group, including even members of rival gangs. Hence, network analyses may prove particularly useful as a means of contextualizing gang identities in their larger social worlds (see Westaby, Pfaff, and Redding 2014).

One obvious challenge for further exploration of gangs' social psychological and communicative aspects is a methodological one. Conducting naturalistic, ethnographic studies or controlled experiments with gang members in order to measure their attitudes and behaviors would not be an easy task. Also, it would be challenging to productively integrate different frameworks from different fields such as behavioral and social science, sociology, and criminology and provide a more complete multi-level analysis of the problem of gangs.

Questions that future studies might explore are: what differentiates gender- and ethnicity-aligned gangs from each other in terms of structure, function, criminality, and process? How and why do some gang members heartlessly and aggressively attack innocent people in the community, especially when they do not seem to be relevant to their group and identity at all? Why do gang members collude with rival gangs in a code of silence in the context of law enforcement interrogation, even if perpetrators are personally known to be responsible for an attack on the ingroup by the outgroup? Is it that there is a code of honor shared *across* gangs?

Until these questions and more are addressed and answered, our work requires a more complete analysis of relevant topics in intergroup communication and social identity settings related to behaviors within and between gangs. As a gang member "Snoopy Blue" of Los Angeles, in an interview with "streetgangs.com" proclaimed, gang membership and activities are "a fucked up cycle, but *it goes on*." Scholars' efforts for understanding gangs in diverse perspectives and theoretical frameworks, including those introduced herein, must also go on.

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