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NAME: Robert Garot

AFFILIATION: Bowling Green State University

CONTACT INFORMATION:

209 Williams Hall  
Bowling Green, OH 43403

PHONE: (419) 372-2415

EMAIL: rgarot@yahoo.com

Abstract:

Like the meaning of swordplay in the film *Rashomon*, the meaning of urban street gangs varies with the interests of the perceiver. While a huge and growing range of quantitative data on gangs is based on positivistic assumptions that a young person either is or isn't a gang member, for young people who engage with gangs on a daily basis, the meaning of being a gang member is much more situated, contingent on who is asking about gang membership, and what might be accomplished in a given instance by "claiming" membership in a gang. This paper will compare these two approaches to gangs, and highlight some of the pernicious consequences that may result when academics reify gangs to a greater extent than young people themselves.

Positivist assumptions regarding gang membership are often anything but problematic. Curry and Decker (2003) note, unselfconsciously echoing the rhetoric of the McCarthy hearings, that asking youths, “Are you now or have you been a gang member?” is the most powerful and direct measure of gang membership. Esbensen, Winfree, He and Taylor (2004:69) concur, noting that “the self-nomination technique is a particularly robust measure of gang membership capable of distinguishing gang from nongang youth.” While the rhetorical force of terms like powerful, direct, and robust is hard to deny, such approaches gloss the artful subtlety and nuance by which young people affiliate with their peers, and interpret their surroundings in deciding how, or whether they should “claim,” or “represent.” This presentation, based on ethnographic data and 65 interviews conducted over four years at an inner-city alternative school, explores some of these artful practices, towards showing how young people problematize what positivistic researchers take for granted. First, a young person may claim a gang in which they are not a member in order to “create action.” Secondly, a young person may claim a gang in which they are not a member to create a sense of prestige. Third, a young person may “kick it” with a gang without being a member, even if his homies have “jumped him in” and claim his as a member. Fourth, a young person may still consider himself in a gang, although he no longer gang bangs. And finally, a young person—even one who is at times recognized as “hard core”—may “rank out,” and refuse to claim his gang membership, if he or she is in a circumstance in which they do not wish their gang membership to be invoked, such as on a date, while shopping, or perhaps, while completing a survey.

1. Claiming a Gang in Order to Create “Action”

Below, Marco tells how he claims a rival gang *in which he is not a member*, as a way of finding opportunities to fight. The gang Marco claims is 18<sup>th</sup> Street; Marco is actually a “member” of Vernon Locos.

“Sometimes I be missing fighting, and just be going to different neighborhoods and just saying that I’m from 18, just so I’ll be getting in a fight, picking a fight.”

Note that such practices are premised on the expectation that someone will demand to know his gang affiliation, to provide the opportunity for his claim. Four years later, Marco reflected on this practice, retrospectively emphasizing its negative qualities as, “exposing yourself.”

“You told me before that you used to go into a neighborhood and claim a gang just so you could get into a fight with somebody.”

“That was crazy. I used to go to neighborhoods to go fuck around with them fools ‘cause I woulda had nothing to do! That’s *exposing yourself*. Know what I mean?”

## 2. Claiming a Gang in Which One is not a Member to Create Prestige

Many gang studies have analyzed the term “wannabe” (most notably Monti, 1994) as indicating one who hangs around with gang members, and wants to be part of a gang, but has not been formally accepted. Monti’s definition of this term differs in a number of ways from how it was used by my consultants. Namely, it carries more positive connotations in Monti’s analysis, indicating young people like Oscar or Jaime (below), who “kick it” with the gang (“experiment” in Monti’s terms) but are not “from” there (“had not made a full commitment,” Monti, 1994:31). For my consultants, however, “wannabe” has a highly pejorative connotation, indicating a young person who acts like they’re from a gang, even though they are not accepted by the gang. Thus, they are actually the reverse of young men like Oscar and Jaime, for while the former “kick it” with the gang but do not formally “claim” it, a wannabe claims a gang he does not “kick it” with. The term “wannabe” is considered derogatory, and refers to others, not oneself. As Donald, a 14 year-old African-American young man states,

“He tries, he says he’s a gang banger but he ain’t. He say, ‘I’m from Watts and like.’ He’ll just say, ‘I like the gang bangin’ better.’ But he ain’t. He don’t gang bang, he just claimin’.”

This is the classic depiction of a “wannabe,” someone who is “just claimin’.” Oliver, a 14 year-old Latino, reiterates Donald’s definition, making clear it’s derogatory significations.

“Do some people say they’re in a gang but they’re not really?”

“Yeah there’s a lot of people like that, the wannabe’s. They’ll say they’re from a gang and they’re not from there.”

“How come they do that?”

“Cause they’re stupid.”

Another term for a wannabe is a “hook,” as revealed to me by Doogan, when he speaks of it in our interview as a deeply insulting term to which he had to respond with physical violence.

“He came up to me, he was like, ‘I heard you was from some pussy ass gang called blah blah blah blah.’ I looked at him, and I was like, ‘What?’ He called me a ‘hook.’ ‘Hook’ meaning you ain’t really a gangster, you a fake. So that made me upset. So I reacted like any other person would’ve reacted [with violence].”

### 3. "Kicking It" with Gang Members

In the following excerpt, Jaime is ostensibly jumped into a gang. Yet Jaime does not fully consider himself to be a gang member. Rather, Jaime embodies the locally recognized niche of “kicking it” with the gang. Jaime’s friends are in the gang, and Jaime hangs around with them regularly. When the “big homies” want to jump Jaime into the gang, Jaime accepts, but he redefines the situation in terms of a fight, saying, “They just wanted to throw down with me.”

“If they’re gang members, and I’m with them and I ain’t from nowhere, they go see the other big homies, and like they gonna wanna jump me, ‘cause I’m with them, even though I don’t want to.”

“Did they try to do that?”

“Yeah! Hell yeah, they try to do that. Actually they did it once, and I was like, ‘Fuck it, you and him.’ And it was three of ‘em that jumped me for like 60 seconds. But like I’m telling you, they didn’t take me down. They didn’t really harm me, so I didn’t really

sweat it. Like fuck them still, they just wanted to throw down with me. That's what they wanted. They such punks, they wanna get three of 'em with me. Fuck it, go at it."  
"Yeah. So they jumped you. After that, did they think you were in the gang?"  
"They used to say that, but I never claimed it or nothing."  
"Hm."

As Jaime describes his reality disjuncture (Pollner, 1975), we see that he has redefined the situation in a different manner than his friends. He knows that they think they have jumped him into the gang, but for Jaime, "They just wanted to throw down (i.e., fight) with me."

The following consultant, Carlos, like Jaime, "kicks it" with gang members, but as he says, "I'm never from that gang."

"I still hang around with them, but I never get into 18th Street now. I hang around but I'm never from that gang."  
"Yeah. So how did you first get into 18th Street?"  
"I'm not from that gang."  
"You're not?"  
"I kick it. My brother's in it, and the homeboys go to my house, we kick it. We go to parties and that."  
"So when people ask you where you're from, what do you say?"  
"I kick it with the 18th Street."  
"You kick it with them?"  
"Yeah."  
"Yeah. (...) So if you say you kick it with them, that's not the same as saying that you're from 18th Street."  
"Yeah, yeah, but still basically if they don't get along with 18th Street, you still gotta go down with them."  
"Uh huh. Yeah. So what does that mean? Do you do things for 18th Street?"  
"Nah. We don't do a thing. Like if you kick it, like if you wanna get in, you gotta kick it first."  
"Uh huh."  
"But like I got brothers, I don't gotta get in; I don't really gotta get in."

In this excerpt, while Carlos seems to be obviously ambivalent about his gang involvement, this is only due to the fact that I, as the interviewer, am not aware of the niche into which he fits himself (for the time being) in the local gang ecology. My question, "how did you first get into 18<sup>th</sup> Street" betrays this ignorance, of which he quickly disabuses me. He then defines "kick it" for me as the specific niche which he embodies. He is in a rather tenuous

position, attempting to reap the benefits of being in a gang, by participating in parties and other social activities, without having to “pay the price” for this involvement by participating in violence. Thus, when 18<sup>th</sup> Street’s rivals ask Carlos “Where you from,” his response is mitigated, such that he is neither “from there” nor from “nowhere.” According to one of the administrators at the school, this is a common practice. As Mr. Merritt states,

“They’ll affiliate with a gang and wear the clothes just to try to be safe, because that’s what controls their neighborhood, but many won’t actually participate in any violence. Kids sometimes get hassled by the cops on their way to or from school, but the more experienced cops are better, and know what’s going on.”

#### 4. Still in a Gang, but No Longer Gang Bangs

a number of accounts from young men who claim to be involved in a gang, but who do not need to “prove themselves” by becoming involved in dangerous activities, as Chris states below.

“I don’t really bang like I used to. But everybody around here is from Central. So everybody around here know I’m from Central, so I ain’t gotta prove myself to nobody.”

While Chris may not have had to prove himself, at times in class, he faced criticism for continuing to affiliate with gang members. On the other hand, his status with his peers was often subject to challenge, as in the following.

Chris mentions that the Vice Lords are in Mississippi. “Vice Lords are in Chicago,” another corrects. “But they in Mississippi too,” Chris protests. Tim comes to his defense and says he is right, but they aren’t as violent as those in Chicago. Someone mentions they was an old-time gang. Chris says they are a real gang, who use their fists instead of guns.

Each of these claims of knowledge is status-imbued, and subject to affirmation and denial of the others. In the first excerpt, Chris, who has been criticized and mocked a number of times already, makes a claim on knowledge by stating that the Vice Lords are in Mississippi. He is quickly corrected by another student who claims the Vice Lords are in Chicago, as any gang

researcher would know. Chris's claims are substantiated by Tim, however, whose size and reputation provide a solid check for validity.

Chris attributes his diminishing involvement with the gang to the strong influence of his mother. As he states, "when I stopped goin' to school, that's when she [his mother] started puttin' like a tight squeeze on me." This process of gradually withdrawing from a gang without being formally "jumped out" is quite common. Below, Joe, an 18 year-old Latino, speaks of how this might occur.

"Did you get jumped out?"

"No I never got jumped out. But um, as you get older, and the homies get older, they understand that you have priorities. Like if you have a kid, shit, they understand, you can't fuck around anymore. Let's leave the (drugs, fighting) and all that to the younger generation."

## 5. Ranking Out

Despite the fact that certain young men claim to be gang members, they aren't gang members *all the time*. Young men who affiliate with gangs engage in many activities, in an engaging class, around a dinner table, or at the movies, where their gang identity is irrelevant. Gang members may also strategically disavow their membership in a gang by ranking out. To "rank out" means that when someone *tells* you "Where you from," you respond with, "I ain't from nowhere," even though, in some sense noted above, others may see you as a gang member at some times. Even Tim, a recognized leader of Central, could mention times when he'd "ranked out on his hood," and expressed disdain for those who didn't rank out on their hood. For instance, below he refers to an incident where the young person he "banged on" was "about to" admit his rival gang affiliation. For Tim, such a person is "stupid," because, "I could've shot him."

"Actually, he was from one of my rival gangs. He was about to say 'Yes,' or some stupid answer. I coulda shot him 'cause I [high pitched:] had the gun right there. Wouldn't nobody

be stupid enough to say ‘Yeah,’ if you see the gun and someone asks if you from--are you from this place?--but some people are.”

Four years later, I spoke with Billy, another leader of Central, who provided me with a similar justification for ranking out

“My friends way over there, and I’m way over here. And if I ranked out, who gonna know? My friends ain’t gonna know I ranked out. My friends ain’t gonna go over there they self. *If I feel this fool gonna take my life over a street, I’m cool, I ain’t gotta claim that street just for five minutes.* Just for a second. When you get back to your home, then you know where you from. But you can be stupid and try to tell ‘em where you from, and let your life get took, that’s on you! But I’ma be the smart guy. Shit. I’m tryin’ to survive! I’m tryin’ to see mo’ days. I’m tryin’ to see stuff I ain’t never seen before. I’m tryin’ to have things I ain’t never had before. Go places I ain’t never went. I ain’t tryin’ to live right now. I wanna be here for a long time, and I mean a long time. Right now, I rank out for five minutes, for a second. I rank out. OK.”

While Billy repeats Tim’s insight that claiming a gang is stupid, especially when one sees a gun, he also notes that his friends are likely not to know that he ranked out, since they would not go to that area where they would have to rank out themselves.

## **Conclusion**

Struggles over the ways gang members are depicted are not simply academic squabbles. Rather, in the words of one nonprofit organization: it’s about the youth. Our representations of gangs have real consequences. If we can appreciate how the rituals of gangs are cultural resources that must be understood, and can be used strategically by any young person in an ecology with gangs, then we might see how profiling young people as gang members to determine a “population” is deeply misguided. Merely to call a young person a “gang member” misinterprets and maligns how young people use identity as a resource, reifying a highly situated and contingent grounded construction. To then multiply this misunderstanding through statistical analysis adds injury to insult. The best response to the demographic question, “how many young people are gang members” is “all of them and none of them; it all depends.” One

would think that if, as a society, we would want to reduce gang membership, we would not refer to young people as gang members, and we would provide other challenging outlets for their creativity. Instead, we reify the importance of gang membership more than young people themselves. We should criminalize victimizing behaviors, and while the rituals of gangs may provide opportunities for such behavior, they also provide opportunities for the expression of *communitas*.

Nevertheless, throughout the past ten years, over 20 states have passed laws explicitly defining “gangs” and “gang members” (Howell, Moore and Egley, 2002).<sup>1</sup> Persons convicted of violating the federal Criminal Street Gangs Statute (1999) can receive a sentence enhancement of up to ten years, and the California Penal Code 1999, section 186.22[b][1] states that “actively participating in any criminal street gang” can result in jail or prison sentence—certainly onerous news for participant observers of street gangs! Even researchers who assume that a meaningful operationalization of gang membership might be found, are uneasy with antigang laws and codes. As Esbensen et al. (2004) wonder, “Given the lack of consensus about what constitutes gang membership, is it viable to implement policies that subject individuals to criminal justice processing due to their alleged gang status?” As one who assumes that a meaningful global operationalization of gang membership ignores any pretense sociology might have to achieve Weber’s ideals of *Verstehen*, I find the massive criminalization of youth merely for adopting a gang identity is a profound misunderstanding of what gangs mean to those who must engage with them, and a tragically unnecessary social loss.

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<sup>1</sup> Under the Institute for Intergovernmental Research, the National Youth Gang Center maintains a list of gang related legislation by state. See <http://www.iir.com/nygc/gang-legis/>

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