Youth Gangs, Community Relationships and Policing

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Acknowledgement of Country

In recognition of the deep history and culture of this land I wish to acknowledge the traditional owners and custodians of this land, and elders past and present.

Youth Gangs

Ambiguity over Gangs

Gangs connote predatory and violent action, usually   by groups of young men. The concept encapsulates notions of aggression, viciousness, chains of brotherhood forged in combat, and codes of obedience and behaviour that discipline individuals to the group's norms and values.

Yet, simultaneously, the idea of gangs has a certain appeal, based on images and portrayals that emphasise shared purpose, strong group bonds, explosions of excitement and adrenaline, and financial and social gratification in the here-and-now.

Gangs are Easy to Blame

Branding certain young people 'gangs' has allowed for widespread vilification of particular groups of street present young people and created political space for the imposition of draconian forms of social control over their behaviour and, indeed, their very presence in the public domain. Moreover, exceptional and dramatic events, such as the English riots of 2011 and Cronulla riots of 2005, provide platforms for the exposition of a form of 'gangs talk' that reduces complex social problems to simple answers and solutions.

Gang war in Melbourne

'Gangs in City Rampage'

- Melbourne city centre on 11 March 2016

Participants:

Members of APEX gang

Members of Islander 23 gang

Forewarning by South Sudanese community leaders and call to Triple-0 operator at 6pm on that Saturday

Political Reactions

'There are a lot of people in Victoria who face challenges in their lives…but they don't behave like those on Saturday night. It is no excuse'.

'I'm not interested and neither are Victorians, in these "poor me" stories. Nobody had to behave the way they did on Saturday night – they chose to'.

Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews

Community Responses

'*Families come here from the most extraordinary situations of torture and trauma and then are thrown into a country without adequate support to get on with life. They're sort of chucked in head-first to sink or swim and, unfortunately, what we are seeing is them sinking*'.

Melbourne City Mission's Sherri Bruinhout

'*They used to come into a hostel…they were taught to understand the system…But now it's straight from the airport to the city*'.

African community leader Berhan Ahmed

Types of Traumatic Stress

Acute Trauma

▶ Single traumatic event – e.g., natural disaster, serious accidents, physical or sexual assault

Chronic Trauma

▶ Multiple traumatic events – e.g., exposure to domestic violence, physical abuse, war

Complex Trauma

▶ Exposure to chronic trauma and the immediate and long-term impact of such exposure on the child – e.g., multiple interpersonal traumatic events from a very young age

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Intergenerational Grief

Trauma Porcupine

nightmares

panic attacks   insomnia

Trauma

self-destructive   shame

depression

Real Problems

Social problems – such as those purported to be associated with the presence of youth gangs – are constructed through a combination of material and cultural factors. There are things going on in the lives of these young people that demand our attention. The study of 'gangs' is the study of real, existing problems.

However, while the problems may be 'real', the definition, magnitude, impact, risk and origins of youth gangs are open to interpretation and dispute.

Gangs Talk Reductionism

Most dedicated researchers of gangs fail to agree on just about everything and anything to do with them – their membership, their size, their make-up, the impact of gender, the rituals (or not) guiding violence, their continuity over time, the degree of threat or harm they pose, their prevalence, their demise. The list goes on.

This observation alone reinforces the fact that **'gangs talk' that reduces social problems to gangs is both illogical and intensely ideological.**

Young People in General

Precariousness

- Wages

- Jobs

- Housing

Mediascape

- Un-truths and lies

- Social media

- Saying something trumps the something that is being said

Network Offending

- New Zealand gangs and social media

- US gang style and localised adaptations

- Media literacy in regards 'real' and 'unreal', 'good' and 'bad

Social Marginalisation

Marginalisation may have a number of interrelated dimensions, including economic (e.g., poverty), social (e.g., exclusion from mainstream institutions), political (e.g., little or no representation) and cultural (e.g., minority religious or language group). The level of social disorganisation and extent of social capital are also seen as vital ingredients in the criminality or otherwise of specific neighbourhoods. In effect, brutal social conditions provide the groundwork for angry and aggressive people, whose main resource is their body rather than capital or wages.

Centrality of Violence

Groups of young people, predominantly young men, are regularly engaged in harmful and at times lethal street violence. Frequently this is stirred by alcohol and illicit drug use, within the cauldron of intense rivalries and group oppositions at the local community level. Violence has become a method of relating to others in its own right, and a preferred means to resolve conflicts in the first instance. Violence is one of the key hallmarks of youth today, most especially for young men. Whether this is a new phenomenon or not is difficult to ascertain, but certainly the historical evidence suggests that it is not. **A social problem with a history nonetheless remains a social problem**.

Gangs in/and Community

The social landscape within which gangs are inscribed is so constantly shifting that groups come and go rapidly, along with their monikers and tag signatures. While the human content of the gang may vary as new kids join up and old ones leave (a typical pattern), or this particular gang forms in this neighbourhood while the one down the block dissolves (again a typical pattern), the 'gang' nonetheless exists regardless of how transient its membership or its formation. But they always exist in relation to something else – **gangs always stem from and are part of larger collectivities and communities of people.**

Gender, Race and Class

Typically gangs are comprised mainly if not exclusively of male members. Likewise, they tend to form in working class neighbourhoods where economically life is tough and opportunities are limited. Moreover, in many cases gang membership is overlayed by ethnic identification and group experiences of racism and social put-downs. Certain neighbourhoods have foisted upon them negative reputations, while particular youths become targets for police attention and media vilification. Studying gangs is thus basically about studying communities, about determining who is connected to whom, how and why. It is about **the ways in which masculinity is constructed on the streets, and how social respect is gained and lost through physicality and violence**.

Community Relationships
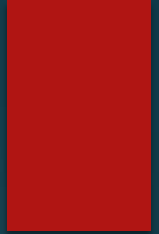
Communities and Young People

Building a sense of empathy – with other people, with victims, with themselves – is about being connected and **social belonging**. Doing something meaningful can assist the process of building community. Shared experiences and shared knowledge helps to create, maintain and build a (positive) community where none may have existed before.

Five Key Ideas

- Respect

- Responsibility

- Rapport

- Responsiveness

- Restorative Ethos

Respect

Respect has two important dimensions

▶ **Self respect** is about being able to achieve a sense of one's self as being a good person. For all of us, this means dealing with the harms we have received and that we have perpetrated, in ways that allow us to nevertheless continue into the future in a positive way.

▶ **Social respect** is about being perceived by others in ways that signal recognition, social worth and community connection. For all of us, 'what people think' matters.

Responsibility

The Duality of Responsibility

▶ **Societal responsibility**: Enhancing opportunities is a societal imperative, to help balance the social disadvantages and personal injuries suffered by many perpetrators of anti-social behaviour.

▶ **Individual responsibility**: A vital part of responsibility is to acknowledge the doing of harm, and that you have actually hurt somebody. At a minimum, taking responsibility means acknowledging the your behaviour negatively affects other people.

Rapport

Rapport is about Talking With Each Other

▶Active use of **new communication technologies** such as smart phones and social media

▶Events marked by a **degree of unpredictability**, due to the diversity and anonymity of participants, and the volatile nature of crowd behaviour – boundaries and rules are needed e.g., Schoolies Week

▶**media** frequently play a major role in reflexively creating anti-social events by publicising them in advance, sensationalising them when they occur, and exaggerating the enormity of particular events relative to 'the Australian way of life'

Responsiveness

Responsiveness is Forged in Community

▶ **Public spaces as 'community spaces'**: community resource, meeting place, social inclusion, physical and social links, public displays, events and facilities

▶ **Constructing a comfortable physical environment**: emphasis on providing a convivial atmosphere which is safe, inviting and secure for all sections of the community, a place where people can congregate, sit and walk

▶ **Participatory regulatory environment**: toleration of diverse activities, diverse groups of people, diverse types of uses of public space, point of intervention (both passive and active) is to facilitate harmonious community relations, not to enforce rules

Restorative Ethos

▶ Whole-of-school participation: teachers, students, counsellors, office admin staff, groundskeepers, accountants, principals

▶ More than just 'conflict resolution': a **way of being** and interacting

▶ Multiple dimensions: food, friends, animals, rules

▶ Restorative ethos = knowing boundaries and enforcing mutual respect through principles and guiding rules

▶ Leadership is 'authoritative' but not 'authoritarian'

Restorative Contexts

A Primary School Initiative in Tasmania

- Issues of trauma: caring for those who need care

- Issues of respect: two-way street

- Issues of therapeutic intervention: don't react to each transgression, understand where the 'acting out' is coming from

- Cross-over of 'clients': juvenile justice and child protection

- Use of animals: school-based, juvenile justice-based

- Strengths-based: what children (and staff) can **do**

The 3 R's

▶ **Respect Yourself**

▶ **Respect Each Other**

▶ **Respect Our Place**

- importance of repeating this message time and again, and at all public forums such as assemblies

- importance that all staff embody these principles as part of modelling for students

- boundaries and rules = 'lines in the sand'; otherwise too much ambiguity and unsafe if no one knows the rules

Community Policing
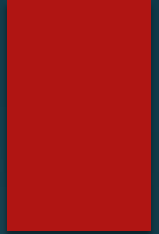
Community-Police Relations

Policing *in* the community — the extent to which police are present within a broad range of social institutions and settings, such as schools and at the neighbourhood level.

Policing *of* the community — the particular task orientation(s) prioritised by police departments.

Policing *by* the community — the degree to which the community (including the media and other governmental departments) participates in the policing process.

Policing *for* the community — the degree to which particular community interests are represented and responded to by police.

Programmes

Active and focussed engagement

- Blue Light
- PCYC
- Police in Schools
- Local crime prevention initiatives

Portfolios

Liaison work as 'additions' to normal work

- ▶ youth
- ▶ Indigenous
- ▶ Gay and lesbian
- ▶ Ethnic minority
- ▶ Disability/mental illness

Practices

The basics of operational policing

- ▶ youth diversion strategies versus charge and arrest
- ▶ zero tolerance versus on-going contact
- ▶ Tactical use of coercive force versus pre-emptive and strategic use of coercion

The Value of Community Policing

Good will and effective policing

- ▶ Building links with diverse members of the community

- ▶ Peacekeeping and peaceful neighbourhoods

- ▶ Police as part of the community, not outside of it

- ▶ Young people respecting those who respect them

- ▶ Less on-the-job stress

- ▶ Reflects actual time commitments and sees the value of these vis-à-vis community level engagement
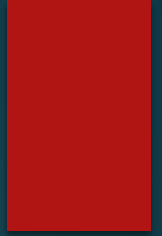
Valuing Community Police

Restoring the centrality of community oriented policing

- ▶ adequate and ongoing training

- ▶ an emphasis on proactive interventions

- ▶ professionalisation of policing, incorporating communication skills and community connecting

- ▶ recruitment of cross-section of the community

Real Persons

The Importance of Biography

The personal search for meaning and the struggle to attain respect are difficult and alienating for many young people precisely because of the systemic limits and pressures on who they are and what they can become. Yet, as demonstrated below, we also need to go beyond the master status of 'gang member' to consider the varied aspects of each person's biography. Biographical accounts, in conjunction with social analysis of communities, demonstrate that people relate and interrelate in complex ways that confound the simplistic stereotype. Life is full of contradictions and paradoxes, and the future is far less predictable than much youth gangs literature suggests.

Complex Humans

Social identity has a series of interconnected objective and subjective features that taken together combine to create multiple and varied identities. We are never just who we say we are. We are always a creative project, a self-in-the-making. We are singular, and collective; agents of our own fate and subject to external pressures. Like a chameleon, we change and morph into different people depending upon social context and empirical circumstance. We are local and global at the same time. We are one, we are many – but all of this takes place within our one singular being.

Mohammad's Story

At the time of interview, Mohammad was 17 years old, a Muslim and Lebanese-background young man. He was very conscious of family and cultural ties.

The best thing about my area is that everyone there is just like me. We came from the same place, our parents have the same background and we all speak the same language, we're into the same things and we can -- like we just know -- we just know, you know, how we all feel and that. It's just like one big family over there. We all grew up together and like people from – it's just like a small part of Lebanon in Australia.

Experiences of Policing

Most of the time it's because they see a big group of Lebo's hanging out and they just walk up "What are you doing here? Why? Go home. Shouldn't you be at home? Shouldn't you be at school?" And they check up your details and like I remember one time a police officer asked me if I had a record and I never had it -- me I didn't know I had a record. I just thought -- I got into a fight a few weeks before and I thought it was just a caution and I said "No." And usually when you say "No" they walk off, but this guy checked up and after that, you know, started "Fuck you. Lying to the police and you fucking this and fucking that" and pushed me against a wall and that and one of my friends came from behind him, you know, as soon as he put his hand on the police officer another cop came and started elbowing him in the back and then, you know, after that it ended up in a sort of a scuffle between us and them.

Home?

No one calling them "Wog". No one telling them to go back to their country. You know like, you know, you look around and you see all these Aussie kids and they're happy on their skateboards and shit and with their mums and their dads and stuff giving them money and stuff and it's because they're in their country. You can't say nothing to them. But us we should -- no matter how long -- not matter how long we're going to be here and no matter how much the government give us money we're always going to feel like we're outcasts …I reckon no matter how much money we have, we're never going to be happy, we're never going to feel accepted.

The sense of outrage and injustice translated into aggressive, violent behaviour. Yelling at people on the streets, picking fights with other young people in the district, stirring people up, these were all part of 'normal' group activities.

Bonding and Mateship

You've always got someone -- someone's always got your back all the time -- all the time. You're never in danger. Like I never feel afraid. Like I can come to Bankstown any time of the day, any time of the year, by myself and I've lived in Bankstown all my life and I've never ever been robbed or harassed or, you know, in Bankstown because of the people I hang out with. You've always got someone to turn to. There's always someone to listen. You can say it's more like a family because we all look after each other. You know a few months ago one of us got ran over and every single one of us went to the hospital every day. Every single one of us went to the hospital every single day until he got out. When he got out at his house we visited him there. So it's like that.

Bullying is Not Good

Bullying is for people that feel low and the only time they feel good is when they find someone weaker than them. Like we don't bully. We don't sit there and see someone looking at us and say "Oh lets go jump him 'cause he's looking at us." We don't fuck -- there is a few of us that go round jumping people for money and that, but I don't know, but we don't make it as like a hobby to just sit there at the station and look at people and just start bullying 'em and pushing 'em around. Actually we're more like a gangster - like there's a kid whose twenty-one. He's got Downs Syndrome. He hangs out with us even though he's not Lebanese. He's not Arab. I think he's an Aussie or something, yeah, but he hangs around with us and like we usually protect him from like if anyone ever makes fun of him like we're the ones that will stick up for him.

Feeling Good, Doing Good

Going to the Mosque a lot makes me feel good. I like to help out around the neighbourhood like if my mum needs something or my friends' mums need something or if their dads need help or anything. Like for example the bloke with me out there his dad is building a house down near Bankstown College and I always go down to help him out there for nothing. Yeah that makes me feel good.

Mohammad's story is one of loss and pain, pride and generosity. It is his story, but it is also the story of his country, his neighbourhood, his friends. It is depressing, yet strangely exhilarating and hopeful. It shows the goodness interspersed with the harshness, and how the senseless can make sense at the level of the everyday.

Tan's Story

When I was younger I kind of went off and did my stuff. Kind of got recruited into a gang pretty much…and it was funny because they were a different nationality to me. It's actually called the Hong Kong Gang, so a Chinese gang and I was pretty much the only Vietnamese person in that group at that time I think in a level that is pretty high. I was asked to learn a bit of Chinese and stuff, so we could relate sometimes and when there's problems you would know what's going on.

► The gang made money by selling drugs, and by stealing and then re-selling items. Tan was recruited to help sell Play Stations that had been stolen from a warehouse. One of his roles in the gang was to facilitate the street-level distribution of stolen goods by finding people to buy the products that they sold, and to find places that were good for an illegal job. In his mid-teenage years, Tan joined the group because he wanted friends, he wanted money and he wanted power. The group he was associated with was based in the city, rather than in the local neighbourhood.

Personal Relationships

She got afraid of me getting hurt most of the time, so and I didn't want to see her being hurt. I kind of cared for her a lot. I think at that time that was the only thing that I cared for – really, really cared for – so I listened to a lot of things she said.

She convinced me it's not worth dying over. You could die for your country, but not over that.

▶ According to Tan, learning personal responsibility ultimately stemmed from his personal relationship and his desire to respect the wishes of his girlfriend.

Redemption

I think after I left the gang I thought 'I've hurt too many people. It's time for me to give back to the community'. I also do a Church Youth Group. I'm with them as well, so yeah it's something to give back for something I've taken out. I think it helps me feel better, sleep better I think during the night.

▶ Redemption for Tan means taking personal responsibility to change one's life. It also means restoring the balance as much as possible.

Giving and Being Good

Each of these young men likewise demonstrated the importance of generosity and 'giving' in their lives. Barry (2006) talks about the importance of the expenditure of various kinds of capital, and well as its accumulation, in the lives of young people. By this, she means that people want to expend – to give something to someone else – as part of feeling good about oneself and one's place in the wider community. Far from being always the taker (as implied in gang activities), there is impetus to also be the giver. Both Mohammad and Tan found contentment in giving up their time and energy as a volunteer for their mosque and church respectively. They didn't have to do this – it was freely chosen and pleasurable activity for both of them. Good and bad rarely resides in the individual; it is constructed around practices, not people.

Temporal Dimensions of Life

The stories of Mohammad and Tan allows us to better appreciate the temporal dimension of lived experience – the ways in which **people and circumstances change over time**. This is important, for as much as anything it precludes locking any individual into a preordained pathway based upon where they are in the here and now. **The future is open and mutable, although the parameters of what is possible are structurally bounded by the weight of the past and the institutional opportunities of the present.** The determinism of positivist risk-based trajectory analysis falls far short in anticipating or explaining the zigzags of real life experiences amongst individuals.

The 'Gang' Is Not Everything

Each of the young men in these case studies was a gang member, and yet much more than this. They were part of ethnic communities, of families, of school groups and of street scenes.

▶ **Not all of their lives was spent 'in the gang'.**

▶ **Not all of their time was spent 'doing gang stuff'.**

Each young man, during the course of their interview, mentioned how scared they were of the violence, of the possibility of not having their close mates around them. They are strong **and** vulnerable at the same time.

A Moral Sensibility

A sense of justice, fairness and generosity permeates the accounts of Mohammad and Tan, even in the midst of oppression, racism and social exclusion. These positive qualities are also intrinsically cross-cultural in nature. We understand and empathise with those who 'do good' by protecting the weak and vulnerable, and who volunteer their time to help others. This, too, is a platform upon which to build community solidarity and inter-communal peace.

Practice Implications

Mistakes

- we all do wrong at some time or other

- learning from mistakes rather than re-living our mistakes

Mentors

- community members, peers, professionals
- time, space, trust, non-judgemental

Mission

- resources, security, jobs
- giving back, achievement
- fun, laughter, humour

Conclusion

▶ Strengthening social belonging and crafting respect involving young people is an intentional social process that is premised on activity, reflectivity and receptivity.

▶ It can be forged as a universal non-coercive approach (e.g., creating a restorative ethos in a school and through community policing) and through a specific project-oriented approach (e.g., community development).

▶ The net result is respect for others, respect for place, and respect for oneself. And the respect **of** others in the community.