The Gang Life: A Culture of Its Own

Joe Lopez
Jose Perez III
&
Guadalupe Cortinas Jr.
Texas A&M International University

Abstract
Culture is a monolithic component of every society. A society is comprised of a group of individuals that share common beliefs, customs, and traditions. It is a way of identification. The various forms of communication go beyond anyone’s understanding. Their dialect defines them as a unique society that is understood only within its members. It is not a particular ethnicity, sorority, religious group, or any other common group that are typically defined as a society. They are the modern extremist. In fact, they are labeled as the menaces to society; although, they are very much a society and a culture on its own. It is the culture of Gangs. The focus on this paper is geared towards understanding how their different components and structures are comparable to the organizations and/or various cultures that are accepted among our society even though their practices go against the norms of what society deems to be acceptable.

Introduction
When ever we think of multiculturalism, we think of African Americans, European Americans, Chinese Americans, and Mexican Americans. We think about every ethnicity in the book. We think about the different groups that exist that make up a particular culture. However, we seldom look at gangs as owning a culture of their own. It’s a group that is frowned upon by society; therefore, society does not acknowledge gangs as being part of a “culture” within our society, particularly in schools. It is a culture that has yet to be understood due to the practices that are sanctioned by society. In order to gain insights and understand the gang as a cultural group and society, we must first understand their cultural practices and norms, and compare how their structures are similar to that of our own despite the extreme differences in customs.

According to Etter (1999), gangs have their own language and customs, and have their own set of rules and codes of conduct. Etter states that their customs are passed on from generation to generation in order to ensure the continuance of the gang. The director of a west coast anti-gang initiative, gangs have a different believe system from that of what society claims to be the norm. Gangs provide an alternative system of belief and system of values in place of religion, family, the school, and the community. In essence, the focus of this research is to better understand the gang culture that is prominent among adolescence population and a nuance in the eyes of society.

In understanding the gang life in relation to culture, it is important to understand the concepts that comprise a particular culture or society. According to Shaefer (2001), societies are a group of people who share common practices and an exclusive terrain. It is a combination of learned transmitted customs, knowledge, behavioral practices, and material objects. People associated with a particular group share a common language, values, symbols, and artifacts in which identifies them as a member of that particular society. In addition, within a society, members of the
group have specific roles and hold a specific status. Status in a gang is described as positions in power yet at different levels.

Each gang has their own customs and traditions. Shaefer (2001) states that gangs formally and informally teach each other the common practices of the gangs such as how to dress and are familiar with its structure in regards to particular rules of a gang such as initiation rites. The norms of a gang are governed by their expectations of what is expected and accepted within its members. Language is one component that identifies a group of people within in a given culture. In gangs, throwing signs and graffiti are forms of expressive language used within gangs. It is important to understand their language in order to comprehend what exactly it is they are communicating about. For instance, Shaefer indicates that if a gang members’ name is written on the wall and later it is crossed out, that signifies that the gang member may be deemed for danger by another gang.

Within a dominant culture, a society may have a general understanding of what particular symbols mean to a particular society. For example, the majority of Americans knows what the U.S Flag symbolizes and understands the significance of earning a college diploma. Gangs too have their own symbols that represent their ideas such as tattoos, clothing, guns, cars, and special jackets.

In another aspect of gang culture is their representation as a social class. Walter Miller (1958), wrote about gangs as a subculture and noted that street gangs are typically found in lower class neighborhoods. In noting the social class gang culture typically correspond to, it inevitable to think about their experiences in schools. Schools display a way of thinking, behaving, and communicating that is shaped by social class. However, most of these communicative and behavioral codes in schools reflect the values, power dynamics, and knowledge base of mainstream middle class or upper class cultures (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Delpit, 1988; Hurn, 1993; Nelson-Barber & Meier, 1990; Persell, 1977). As a result, the gang cultures have different linguistic and behavioral codes and expectations from those of the mainstream middle-class that cause cultural incongruity in the educational setting. According to McDermott’s theory of cultural incongruence (1987), school failure for lower-class children is built of the culturally incongruent actions, reactions, and interactions between middle-class teachers and lower-class “pariah” students or students belonging to a gang. In addition McDermott’s theory, helps to explain the culture of gangs’ behavior that is in defiance of the middle class, its laws, authority figures, and their tendency to be careless and aggressive (at least in the eyes of the middle class). In other words, schools need to understand gang culture just like any other culture to better serve those students.

Learners who are identified from a lower class background (regardless of race) tend to be perceived negatively, as less capable than they probably are, while those from families and communities located higher in the social-class hierarchy tend to be perceived positively (McDermott, 1987; Persell, 1977, 1983; Rosenholtz & Rosenholtz, 1981). In multiculturalism education, such pattern is identified and addressed, but gang culture even though containing this pattern is at times overlooked or excluded. Personal experience in the educational setting with the gang culture, I have frequently heard comments such as, “those kids will never amount to anything, bunch of losers, gangbangers, trash,…etc” which are all negative comments and perceptions of educators that their job requires to meet their needs under the umbrella of multicultural education. In essence, gang culture exists and educators perceive it as negative and at times fail to address.

The negative perceptions may come because these students are more than often resilient and defiant. However, peer groups consisting of students who find school unfamiliar, unfair, unstimulating, or hostile environment may develop a culture that is centered around or includes elements of resistance to the formal culture of the school (Anyon, 1980; McDermott, 1987; Neufeld, 1991).
Moreover, this resistance may take many forms, among them noncompliance or nonparticipation in the classroom, outright defiance of school staff and school regulations, cutting class, dropping out, or engaging in illegal activities on or off school grounds (Solomon, 1992).

The gang culture includes resilient behavior and has been defined as a culture of violence (Carlie, 2002). Carlie (2002) speculates that this culture of violence in some cases stems from early childhood exposure of abuse, generational gang involvement, and violence against oneself and others.

In a recent article, Carrillo (2001) describes the struggles she faced as a teen growing up with parents who were active gang members. Not only did she experience violence from family members in her home, she was also a participating gang member. Carrillo (2001) offers the following experience, “One Day, when I was 14 or 15, my friends and I got into a fight with members of another gang. One of my friends was to going to get hurt, so I fired my gun to protect him. I ended up shooting an innocent bystander, a little kid…I remember thinking, she’s just a child, and doesn’t have anything to do with this.” She goes on to state that violence has always been a part of the life of a gang member, and a life without violence was never really an option.

Erlanger and Persily (1976) share this same sentiment of how violence is intertwined with the culture of gangs. They explain that individual members of a gang get their sense of identity from their peer group, which then results in a strong sense of turf. This sense of turf then functions to increase the potential for conflict, and thus violence, between nearby rival gangs.

McEvoy, Erickson and Randoph (1997) discuss the function that violence has over juvenile gangs, such as one of power over other gang members. Their research reflects that violence is always a characteristic of gangs regardless age of group members. Gang violence can also be understood as a means to achieve desired ends, although the method itself is undesirable (McEvoy et al, 1997).

The culture of violence that resonates in gangs is influenced through several ways. Gang members identify being exposed to gang violence in their homes, on the street and by their peers who they associate with. Additional research indicates that ex-convicts continue to have a negative influence on gangs and the communities (Carlie, 2002).

Ex-convicts traditionally struggle with staying away from gangs and violence upon their release from jail (Howell & Decker, 1999). As a result, ex-convicts have been able to infiltrate gangs and have a negative impact on their communities (Howell & Decker, 1999). Ex-convicts struggle to reintegrate into society based on the stereotypes and realistic struggles that they face(Wheeler & George, 2001).

Howell and Decker (1999) discuss the effects of ex-convicts reentering society after having served their time in jail. Their research indicates that ex-convicts who reentered society and joined youth gangs increased the life and the violence level of gangs. They go on further to describe how these same ex-convicts bring a highly complicated sense of gang loyalty from the prison system that was nonexistent in the common street gang. Slowly the ex-convicts infiltrate the youth gangs and develop a culture within the gang culture. The ex-convicts use their influence and experience from the prison to develop and reshape the gang they just joined. Viewed by the gang as the ones with “experience,” they introduce and expose gang members to drug trafficking and violent crimes.

Petersilia (2003) describes the struggle that ex-convicts face upon release from prison and the impacts they have on gangs and the communities in which they reside. The author goes on further to analyze how the overwhelming large numbers of ex-convicts have more than quadrupled within the last quarter century. Unfortunately, these same ex-convicts understandably struggle with
becoming law abiding citizens, such as having difficulty finding honest employment or society acceptance. The majorities of the ex-convicts reenter their previous gangs or affiliations with criminal activity and are rearrested within six months of their release from prison. Public safety, the criminal justice system, and the social welfare system are likewise are being impacted by ex-convicts as they reenter society. (Wheeler and George, 2001)

Ex-convicts have struggled to be productive citizens of the United States upon their release from jail. Because of the many barriers placed upon them when reentering society, many become re-integrated into the gangs they affiliated with either before or during their prison experience. Their involvement in gangs functions to increase violence and criminal activity, thus perpetuating the unhealthy cycle of delinquency.

In thinking of gangs as a culture of their own, helps in understanding them and its members more fully. A better understanding of gang culture and clear acknowledgement that it is a part of the multiculturalism realm may facilitate in developing strategies for reducing gang activity and youth violence in schools and in society. Every society offers its members something, whether it's a sense of belonging, power, affection, status, or something else of value to the recipient. What gang researchers have discovered is that, for many children in the United States, neighborhood and community social institutions which are supposed to provide these things are not ... gangs are. If we understand that, we can develop ways to provide these things to local youth legitimately so that joining a gang is not necessary.
References