

Gang talk

Fact and fiction in London street gang careers

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Debate about the myth and reality of gangs in Britain has been intense. To what extent does the fictional depiction of street gangs feed into reality?



Some say gangs are largely fictional, a figment of an establishment imagination which is hooked on American popular culture and unable to explain the activities and motivations of young people (Hallsworth 2013). Others say gangs in contemporary Britain are only too real, the by-product of complex problems that the government is reluctant to face, such as technological change that has displaced workers, globalisation that has destabilised communities, and inequality and injustice that has disintegrated families (Pitts 2008).

Signposts



This interesting article is based on ethnographic fieldwork in London. The authors show how, for gang members and the police, the meaning of 'gangs' is based on a combination of both the fictional depiction of gangs and 'real life'. It is important to note the interplay of ethnicity, poverty, deprivation and location in gang membership, and how this is often seen as a 'career' — a route to 'quick money' and respect.

The article is particularly useful for the topic of 'Crime and deviance', but also raises issues of identity and stratification.

Key concepts



subterranean traditions, structuration, narrative criminology, career, racial inequality

It may be the case that both sides of this debate have something valuable to tell us. Our research suggests that, when it comes to London 'gangs', fiction feeds into fact and vice versa.

Gang fact

We can find groups that fit the criminological definition of a gang (Harding 2014). There are groups in London that can be described as self-formed associations of peers that have adopted common names and other discernible signs of membership. These groups are comprised of individuals who recognise themselves (and are recognised by others) as being 'members' of 'gangs'. And these 'gang members' individually or collectively engage in, or have engaged in, a pattern of criminal activity; so much so that they cannot call the police to settle their disputes.

Gang fiction

However, the London gang phenomenon is also fictional in two important ways:

- Firstly, people who join gangs use fictional tales of what other gangs are like in order to create the names, structures and activities of their gang.
- Secondly, police and political action against gangs is often informed by such fictional notions, as well as by the actual realities, of gangs. Both gang members and the people who attempt to control them use realities and fictions when they talk about gangs.

Why join a gang?

We attempted to use these facts and fabrications in answering the question of how and why some young people in some of Britain's socio-economically deprived urban areas associate themselves with gangs in the first place, and how they use the gang as they grow up. Gang membership typically results in increased violent and criminal victimisation, regular contact with the police, and the strong prospect of imprisonment — hardly attractive prospects.

So why do some young people join gangs? Do they casually 'drift' in and out of gang life? We suggest that they purposefully — but often self-destructively — use gangs to transform 'subterranean traditions' of violence and consumption into rules and routines that provide structure and meaning to their lives (Matza 1961).

This suggestion arises from our analysis of interviews with 69 self-described members and associates of street gangs in London. It is important to mention that nearly all of them were of African or African-Caribbean ethnic origin. Many of them saw race and racism as crucial in affecting their decisions to be part of a gang. Our analysis of the interview data that came from talking with these gang members produced interesting findings. They are informed by theoretical concepts including 'subterranean traditions' (Matza 1961), 'structuration' (Giddens 1984) and the approach of 'narrative criminology' (Presser 2009). See Box 1 for more on our methodology.

The search for money and respect

To understand gang members, one first needs to understand where they come from. Poverty in London is increasingly spatially concentrated. For this reason, our interviewees felt relegated to neglected, socio-economically deprived areas of the inner city where they did not see opportunities for valued employment and consumption. One gang member observed:

There's no jobs, no opportunities here ... when you came here, what did you see? Bookies, off-licence, chicken shop, pub. And ain't no nice pub but some, you know, with bare alcoholics sitting there all day. Dodgy mobile phone shop, pound shop, another chicken shop. I don't even know where the library is right now. This place is almost built like to encourage crime.

Our interviewees saw available, legitimate work in local retail stores and fast-food restaurants as demeaning and poorly paid. Better jobs existed, of course, but the education and training necessary to secure them was seen as prohibitively expensive in terms of time and money, with little guarantee of return on investment (plenty of black university graduates are unemployed and underemployed, gang members argued).

Besides, the rewards of an office job still paled in comparison to the attractions of the 'good life': German cars, Italian clothes, Swiss watches, French champagne. Our interviewees saw all these in the mainstream media and in the mythologies of 'successful' gang members. For them, the street gang was the most obvious path towards the 'quick money' and respect they desired.

Box 1 Methods used in the research

Data were gathered during 2 years of ethnographic fieldwork with 12 inner London gangs, including face-to-face interviews with 69 gang members and their associates. The self-nominated gang members and associates were predominantly young black men who lived in socio-economically deprived areas of the city. They were recruited via a snowball or 'chain-referral' sampling method.

Race and the police

Underpinning our interviewees' search for money and status was racial inequality in the distribution of resources and life chances. Our interviewees grew up in positions that they could see were marginalised in British social and economic life. They tended to blame dominant (by which they meant 'white') society for blocking all legal routes to success and for diverting them down the road of gangs.

Lived experiences of racism were enhanced by learned memories of 'sus laws', race riots and posted placards reading 'No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs'. These memories were handed down to them from parents, grandparents and community elders. How can the government condemn gang-related violence, interviewees argued, when they perpetrate racial violence on a daily basis?

Policing in ethnically diverse neighbourhoods today takes place in the shadow of this shameful racist history. Stop-and-search encounters disproportionately affect young black people and our interviewees knew this from their everyday experience. They did not see the police and the law as there to help them. In the words of one gang member:

Out here you're not living under police protection. ... So we find our own protection. We ... police ourselves. We equip ourselves with tools to protect ourselves, you understand? We're a phone call away. Where the police? Police just tell you to go file a report.

Protection is another key driver for gang membership. In communities where the murder rate can be twice the national average, the state's monopoly on the use of force feels fragile. Interviewees spoke about living in a 'war zone' where knife-carrying was routine and someone might steal their phone, not to use it, but just because they could. Even young black men not in gangs face the possibility of both violence from peers and repeated interventions from police. One interviewee observed:

You're automatically stereotyped. It's like all black people are criminals. [The police] got this policy where, more than three [people in a group], you're considered a gang so you automatically get stopped. ... After a time, you feel like, 'Oh we a gang now? Okay, we'll show you gang.'

'NO IRISH, NO BLACKS, NO DOGS'

To 'show you gang', gang members can conform to how they think others think them to be, resulting in a staged authenticity that satisfies public expectations, but also constructs its own reality.

The gang as alternative career

For some interviewees, life in a gang was seen as an alternative 'career', with specific rules and routines. Gang membership afforded them the seductions of sex, drugs, violence and nightlife, but also came with the repetitive stresses of acquiring and selling drugs, of following orders, of performing unpleasant (sometimes boring) tasks, and of keeping up appearances on the street. Like other professional careers, therefore, the subterranean career of the gang combined opportunities to achieve pleasure, reward and status with unavoidable doses of drudgery and submission.

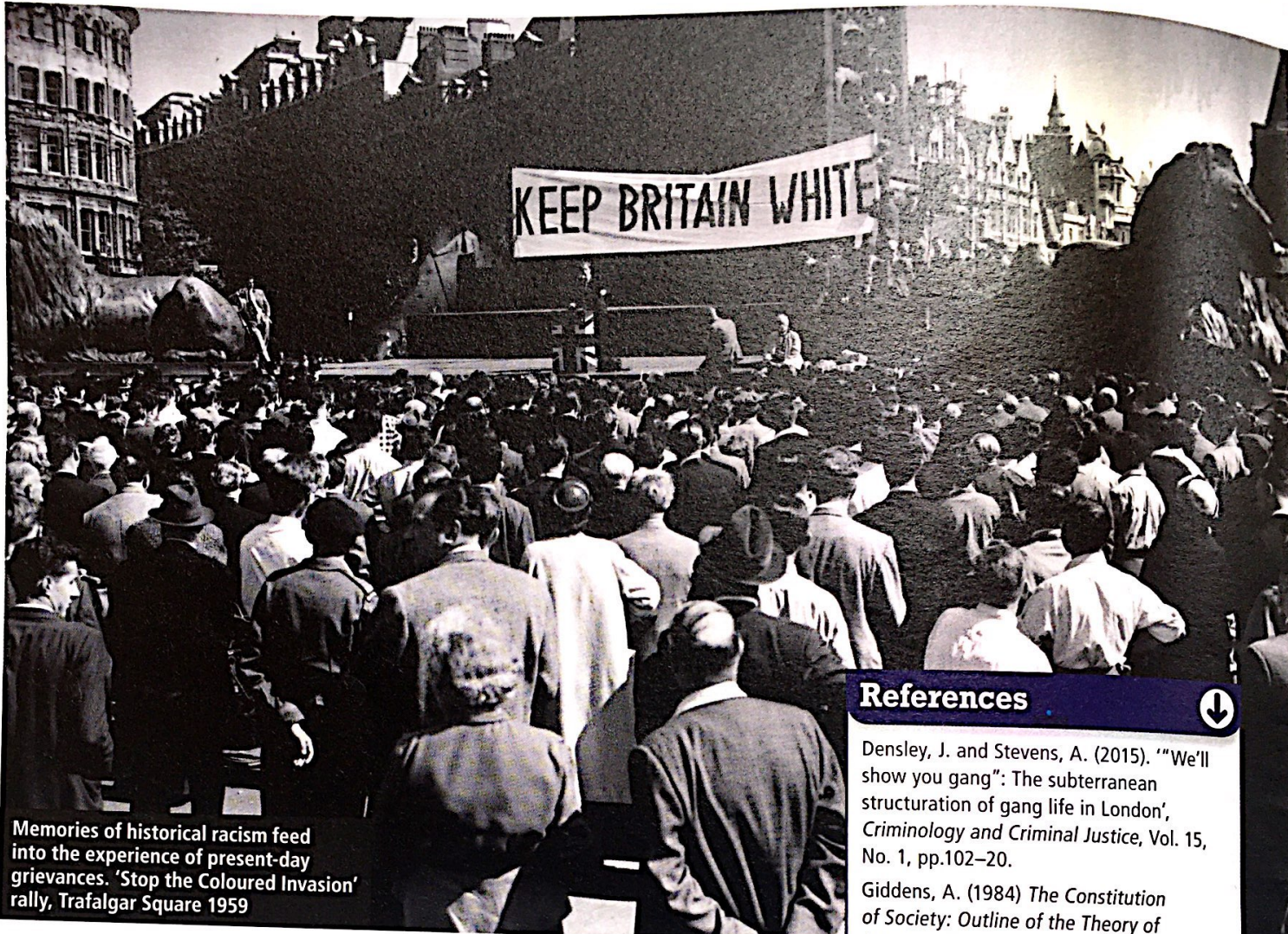
Recruitment

Our interviewees' use of the word 'career' to describe their involvement in gangs should not be taken to mean that they were all planning (or had planned) strategic advancement through the progressive stages of gang life. Indeed, only a small minority of people who grew up in the neighbourhoods we studied would even describe themselves as 'gang members'. More young people share backgrounds and motivations befitting gang membership than actually join gangs.

This is in part because gangs proactively screen and select prospective members based on their likelihood of contributing to the reputation of the group — a common asset — and of protecting its existing members from police scrutiny and local rivals (see Densley and Stevens 2015). Only young people with certain experiences, reputations and attributes are enabled to join gangs. And, in some cases, only those with prior connections to active gang members, for example as childhood friends, cousins and brothers, would be trusted.

Retirement

Like legitimate careers, gang careers eventually end, although not necessarily with someone dead or in prison as legend suggests. Some interviewees simply grew tired of gang life. Life 'on road' was a 'young



Memories of historical racism feed into the experience of present-day grievances. 'Stop the Coloured Invasion' rally, Trafalgar Square 1959

man's game', one interviewee explained; the older gang members got, the more they had to lose. But for 'retired' ex-gang members, the problem remained of how to find alternative forms of occupation and meaning.

Criminal records, violent reputations, the scars and tattoos of gang activity, and continued suspicion and labelling by police and community (including rival gangs) all contribute to uncertain futures. For some, the only available work lies as youth workers within the 'ending gang and youth violence' industry where street credibility still matters.

Conclusion

Our interviews with gang members suggest that gangs cannot be analytically separated from the influences of social class, place and

LIFE 'ON ROAD' WAS A 'YOUNG MAN'S GAME', ONE INTERVIEWEE EXPLAINED

ethnicity. These facets of social structure are enabling as well as constraining (Giddens 1984). Our interviewees can be seen as pursuing Matza's (1961) subterranean values of pleasure, violence and instant gratification. Yet these values are not fundamentally 'other' to the mainstream values of British society, which has always validated pleasure, violence and consumption for some of its members.

Due to experiences of inequality and social exclusion, our interviewees saw a gang career as the only viable means to live out these values. These young people were using available cultural resources (in the forms of stories, local legends and media presentations of gangs) to learn and reproduce rules and routines through which they could solve — in the short term — problems that were presented to them by their structural positions and personal biographies. The longer term harms that these 'solutions' produced for themselves and others only became all-too-real to them as they grew older.

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