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Researching Transnational Gangs as Agents of Mediation in the Digital Era¹

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Abstract: In the XXI century, the traditional conformation of gangs has been altered for several reasons. The present global economic situation changed the context of gangs, and as a feature of this century, Internet and social media have shifted social relations and the way urban gang members interact. Ethnographic data demonstrate that gang members and ex-members are not only involved in crime and deviance but can also act as agents of mediation. How can we understand 21st century gangs and develop a renewed definition that includes the characteristics of the current era? This chapter aims to develop a transnational, intergenerational, intergeneric and transmedia approach for the gangs of the 21st century, which is different from the local, coetaneous, male, and face to face model used to understand the gangs of the 20th century. First, a brief walk through different gang traditions worldwide is presented. Secondly, a review of the different attempts to propose a gang definition is provided, from past approaches to more recent ones. Thirdly, the impact of information and communications technology (ICT) on gangs is reviewed. Fourthly, we explore the role of gang members as informal/natural mediators. To conclude, a renewed theoretical approach is proposed to research gangs using traditional and virtual ethnographic methods. The purpose is to provide an accurate picture of current offline and online urban street groups.

Keywords: gangs, youth, violence, mediation, cyberganging, conceptualization

Introduction

Gangs are gangs, wherever they are found. They represent a specific type or variety of society, and one thing that is particularly interesting about them is the fact that they are, in respect to their organization, so elementary, and in respect to their origin, so spontaneous.

(Robert E. Park, preface in Thrasher 1927/2013, p. ix)

In the XXI century, profound societal changes seem to have altered the appearance of gangs in comparison to how they are depicted traditionally. The globalization of society suggests young people can be marginalized from an economic and social point of view, but not necessarily culturally or politically (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2008). Economic and social breakdowns in several countries meant that there are fewer opportunities available to young people in terms of well-paid jobs which caused migration to other countries in order to establish a life plan using contemporary forms of travel. Furthermore, the digitalization of post-modern societies added a virtual global sphere where youth identity models circulate through the internet.

If we look at gang formations nowadays, we detect structural fluidity, significant geographic mobility, and strong presence in social media. Many gangs are not strictly territorial, nor do they have a compact structure. Gangs today often seem more like nomadic identity clusters that mix elements from their respective countries of origin, from their host countries, but also from many other transnational styles that circulate through the Internet and social media. This phenomenon corresponds to the youth cultures of the global age more generally, which have been characterized as “hybrid identities” (Nilan and Feixa 2006).

To address the new challenges that 21st century gangs reveal, the aim of this chapter is to discuss gang definitions and propose a renewed transnational, intergenerational, intergeneric and transmedia approach for the gangs of the 21st century. The epistemological focus is also extended

to include gang members' attempts to work as agents of mediation. First a brief overview of different gang traditions worldwide is presented. Secondly, we conduct a review of the different attempts to propose a gang definition, from past approaches to more recent ones. Thirdly, we discuss the impact of information and communications technology (ICT) on gangs. Fourthly, the role of gang members as informal mediators is explored. Fifth, a renewed theoretical approach is proposed for doing research with gangs. The chapter is closed by a conclusion section addressing all the issues that have emerged throughout the chapter when talking about gang definitions: age, gender, geographical features, structure formation, digitalization, mediation, identities and resilience and resistance. All in all, our new approach allows us to obtain a more accurate picture of current offline and online urban street groups.

1. Subcultural gang traditions worldwide: from classical gangs to gangs 2.0

(...) a gang emerges when the youths in these areas, primarily those from the first and second generation, become frustrated and disillusioned upon realizing they are not likely to find jobs that can allow them to rise above the socioeconomic level attained by their parents.

(Portes and Rumbaut 2001, p. 204)

In the history and evolution of youth street gangs worldwide, several subcultural traditions can be distinguished (Brotherton and Barrios 2004; Feixa and López 2014; Klein and Maxson 2006; Matza 1961; Venkatesh 2009). The first one is the North American street gang tradition. This was closely linked to the process of urbanization in the United States, and to the process of “magical recovery” of the original ethnic identity by the second and third generation of young people with a migratory background. This trope of recovery was translated into the model of the territorial gang, well organized and basically composed by men: the classic object of urban ethnography (Klein 1995; Thrasher 1927/2013; Whyte 1943).

The second tradition is exemplified by Latin American gang traditions of different scale: *pandillas* and *naciones*. Here, a gang is a social street group organized in neighbourhoods with precise geographic boundaries. Nations represent a higher level of gang organization, with

hundreds of members. Although they may have some criminal connections, sociability is the main function of both groups. They create a distinctive lifestyle that resolves conflict through music and dance challenges. *Maras* are an extreme version of this tradition, arising in Central America in the post-war period (Feixa 1998; Perea 2007).

The third tradition is represented by the European subcultures that young immigrants find when they arrive: global networks to allow gangs to pass from local gangs to global tribes (Esbensen and Maxson 2012; Klein et al. 2001; Leccardi 2016; Queirolo 2016; van Gemert et al. 2008).

The fourth tradition is represented by Arab youth subcultural traditions, including street vendors, football fans, rappers, *hittistes*² and *baltagiyya*³. In countries like Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Egypt, they emerge in a process of hybridization with their own cultural traditions of North Africa, marked by the importance of the family (Bayat 2012; Camozzi et al. 2014; Nilan 2016; Sánchez García 2010).

The fifth and most recent tradition is formed by the virtual global universes represented by youth identity models that circulate through the Internet. In the last decade there has been an evolution of gangs towards more complex forms of socialization (Fraser and Hagedorn 2018; Hagedorn 2007; Vigil 2002). These ‘global gangs’ (or gangs 2.0) are no longer strictly territorial, nor do they have a compact structure. They are nomadic identity groups that mix elements of their respective countries of origin, of their host countries and of many other transnational styles that circulate through the Internet and social networks. These hybrid identities correspond to the youth cultures of the global era (Nilan and Feixa 2006), where gangs’ cultural practices and creative products demand recognition for collective empowerment. As Manuel Castells (1996)

2 In Algeria, literally "those leaning against the wall," used to designate young people who spend the day on the street looking for means of subsistence. They move in groups and stand at strategic thoroughfares, so they know everything that is happening in the district and take advantage of it.

3 In colloquial Egyptian, literally those who carry the axe, to designate the loyal servants of the Ottoman sultan in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Currently it refers to groups of thugs or gangs, hired to attack regime objectors from the 1990s, when the Egyptian police decided to control them and turn them into a paramilitary corp.

argued over twenty years ago, the network society is a 'space of flows,' exemplified by online connectivity. The 'affordances' (potentials, opportunities) of the Internet are crucial to the contemporary social practices of youth, including the constitution of gangs. These increasing possibilities, mainly for the favoured classes, create a new type of exclusion among the popular classes: not only technological exclusion -not having access to technology- but also a new kind of media literacy exclusion – not having all the necessary competences to make the most of ICTs.

The evolution among gangs, reflected by this fifth tradition, inevitably has consequences on the study and definition of gangs. It highlights the necessity of a new conceptual framework based on ethnographic evidence that helps to deal with the main defiance of the 21st century gangs.

2. Challenges for (re)defining gangs in the 21st century

There are group-like networks and behaviours at an incipient phase, even if media tend to identify them with the criminal and durable organizations similar to the North American gang pattern.

(Feixa et al. 2008, p. 65)

According to Thrasher's definition, a gang is "an interstitial group originally formed spontaneously, and then integrated through conflict" (Thrasher 1927/2013, p.57). Thrasher also points out that gangs, as forms of sociability, are characterized by a behaviour guided by face-to-face encounters, fights, urban spatial movement as a unit, conflicts with other agents and the planning of their actions. Thus, "the result of this collective behaviour is the development of a tradition, unreflective internal structure, *esprit-de-corps*, solidarity, morale, group awareness, and attachment to a local territory" (ibid.). In line with this approach, a gang can be characterized as an informal group of peers who are attached to a territory, in conflict with other peer groups and sometimes with adult institutions.

Although crime is not the main reason why gangs form, the police and political approaches in the United States have reinforced the criminal conceptualisation of gangs. When delinquency was not considered as a fundamental attribute of youth street behaviour, other concepts were used, such as peer groups, street groups, subcultures, countercultures, or lifestyles, among others, and the term gang was reserved for youth street groups with members from mainly minority, migrant or ethnic backgrounds. However, the criminological tradition has tended to use the term gang as a synonym of youth street group more or less linked to criminal activities.

Offering a gang definition with which all social actors (gang members, researchers, social workers, institutions, among others) can agree has always been a difficult challenge. Gangs are not static objects of study, instead gangs are “dynamic, flexible and ever-changing” (Sanders 1994, p. XI). In addition, terms and meanings may vary according to geographic locations and subcultural traditions, as seen in the previous section. Hence, during the 20th and 21st century, scholars have faced different challenges and have provided different approaches when trying to offer a conceptualisation of gangs.

The first challenge is deciding how much we include by the way in which we define ‘youth gangs.’ Two approaches can be found among researchers: 1) offering wide definitions that gather more young people into the gangs’ conceptual net; and, on the other side, 2) offering a narrow approach, which usually involves focusing more on the illegal activities of the group, and, consequently, being a member of a gang is seen as a criminalized behaviour. This perspective is represented by academic researchers who apply Klein’s definition, developed in the seventies in Los Angeles: “a gang is a group of young people that can be identified by: a) being perceived as an aggregation different from the others in the neighbourhood, b) recognizing themselves as a defined group, c) being involved in various criminal episodes that generate a constant negative reaction of the neighbours and/or of the services in charge of the application of the law” (Klein 1971, p. 13). In this direction, the Eurogang network of researchers has decided on the following

definition: “a street gang (or troublesome youth group) is any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of their group identity” (Esbensen and Maxson 2012, p. 5). These broad definitions focus the core criteria on durability, street-orientation, youth, identity and, most importantly, illegal activity.

The second challenge is to provide nuance and context in the conceptualisation of gangs. If we only focus on gangs as a social problem, we do not pay attention to fundamental underlying issues like racism, poverty and social inequality. Scholars can also fail to capture the fluidity and contradiction inherent in gang identification. Furthermore, a too narrow definition may prevent seeing that gangs can develop into either pro-social organizations or more organized criminal entities, and it may create an artificial sense of similarity between diverse cultural contexts.

A third challenge is how to study collective behaviour and group commitments while integrating personal experience and individual behaviour as well. The gang is often treated as an analytical frame about group status and relationships with other social subjects as individuals, criminalizing all the members. Here the focus is on collective behaviour and group engagements, and the personal experience is ignored. A good example of this is Miller’s definition of a gang: “A self-formed association of peers, united by mutual interests, with identifiable leadership and internal organization, who act collectively or as individuals to achieve specific purposes, including the conduct of illegal activity and control of a particular territory, facility, or enterprise” (Miller 1992, p. 21).

The last critical challenge we would like to point out when trying to offer a gang definition is how to integrate and emphasize the creative and agency capacities of members of youth street organizations. The definitions that line up into this issue, take gang’s cultural productions and forms of sociability as resistance practices, contradictory and ambiguous, against a set of discrimination processes by culture, class, race and ethnicity. In this sense, Queirolo Palmas (2014, p.23) defined gangs as "urban youth groups that take shape in the interstices of a post-

migration society, with their cultural practices and sometimes cooperative interactions that are sometimes conflicting, and which are designated by the thinking of the institutions and the media as gangs, a signifier associated with violence, crime and social danger." A definition that attempts to collect all of these attributes is that offered by Brotherton and Barrios (2004, p. 23): "groups formed in large part by young people and adults from marginalized classes, whose objective is to provide their members with an identity of resistance, an opportunity for empowerment both individually and collectively, of a possible 'voice' capable of challenging the dominant culture, of a refuge with respect to the tensions and sufferings of daily life in the ghetto and, finally, of a spiritual enclave in which practices and rituals considered sacred can be developed." In this perspective, we find the Latin American tradition of gang studies, understanding gangs as social formations that attempt to build a cultural citizenship from the margins.

3. Gangs in a digital era: online gangs' performance and some methodological notes

In a world of networks, the ability to exercise control over others depends on two basic mechanisms: (a) the ability to constitute network(s) and to program/reprogram the network(s) in terms of the goals assigned to the network; and (b) the ability to connect and ensure the cooperation of different networks by sharing common goals and combining resources while fending off competition from other networks by setting up strategic cooperation.

M. Castells (2011, p.776)

The Internet and social media have shifted social relations and the way citizens interact, especially among young people. Urban gang members, usually formed by troublesome youths living in violent neighbourhoods, have introduced these new communicative trends into their daily experiences (Décary-Hétu and Morselli 2011; Moule et al. 2014; Pyrooz et al. 2015). Gangs were present on the first social networks (such as MySpace), are on today's social networks (such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or, more recently, Tik Tok), and they will probably be in the forthcoming new trends occurring within communication platforms. As in the

offline sphere, online content reflects the gangs' activities and identity in the global and digital age. In contrast to traditional media, digital platforms offer youth street groups a place for cultural construction through their representations, self-representations and online practices.

The presence of gangs in these social media sites is widely known among scholars as 'Internet banging' (Patton et al. 2013) or 'cyberbanging' (Morselli and Décary-Héту 2013). Focusing on gangs' online activities, previous researches have shown that gangs use social media to promote gang affiliation, glorify gang life, display power, achieve gang notoriety by threatening or reporting participation in criminal acts, to create an information sharing network or even to support criminal activities (Patton et al. 2013; Pawelz and Elvers 2018). Regarding criminal activities, many scholars have focused on exposing the relation between social media use and violence (Patton et al. 2013; Pyrooz et al. 2015; Moule et al. 2014), concluding that gang members' behaviours on social media may include selling drugs, harassing, posting violent videos or downloading illegal music (Patton et al. 2014). However, although gang members behaviour online can lead to criminal acts, Morselli and Décary-Héту (2013) point to different conclusions. According to these authors, gang presence on social media is more linked to individual displays than group awareness, and the use of social media is "more likely to diffuse the non-criminal features of the group and the problems that they were facing from what they displayed as overzealous law-enforcement" (Morselli and Décary-Héту 2013, p.165). Nevertheless, as Morselli and Décary-Héту (2013, p.166) highlighted, whereas street gangs are not proactively recruiting gang members, "social networking sites are, however, creating a new venue for people who share or are sensitive to the values underlying street gang lifestyle to come together."

Taking into account the studies presented, it is clear that studying gangs today must include the social media spaces of youth street group members. Not only is it important to explore where gang members are in the virtual world, but also to understand what the

significance of their consumption is, and the use and meaning of using social media in the construction of the lifestyle of youth street groups. The literature reveals different methodological approaches for studying online behaviour among gangs. On the one hand, we find studies asking gang members directly through interviews, observation, focus groups and surveys (Campana and Varese 2018; Moule et al. 2014; Pawelz and Elvers 2018; Sela-Shayovitz 2012; Storrod and Densley 2017; Urbanik and Haggerty 2018). On the other hand, others go directly to the online sources using netnography, social network analysis, content analysis and other digital techniques (Décary-Hétu and Morselli, 2011; Patton et al. 2018; Wijeratne et al. 2015; Balasuriya et al. 2016). Of course, both approaches can be combined, as some studies already do.

From our point of view, studying gangs online should include qualitative ethnographic analysis but also other approaches like informetric analysis, social media network analysis and content analysis, which are closer to sociology and media studies. Using other research methods does not imply losing the humanist focus. Following Kozinets' argumentation on how to conduct netnography: "attention to the details and contexts of human stories and human understandings, of people using technologies, is the hallmark of genuine netnography" (2015, p.2), we consider that a virtual ethnography approach must foresee human interaction between researchers and research subjects. This must imply involving gang members in the research process. Otherwise, the interpretation of the results, and even the netnography itself, would be a hard task to undertake. That is because, unlike other subjects of study (youth in general, urban tribes, and so on), gangs usually try to hide their digital print or, at least, stay out of the police and institutions focus. It means that gangs are usually operating as what is known as covert networks (Oliver et al. 2014).

There are three possible approaches when studying gangs online: 1) researching what people think about gangs (public opinion in social networks); 2) researching what gangs reveal

about themselves (group identity construction in public online channels -Facebook pages, open personal profiles, etc.) and 3) researching what gang members show in their personal and private profiles (online life stories). This last approach can be difficult to implement and requires the researcher to be trusted by gang members. The first and second approaches will help researchers to show the interest and usefulness of the research to gang members; and this can in turn contribute to obtaining deeper gang member involvement, and, therefore, to easily reach the third approach. Of course, offline ethnography is always useful when talking about getting gang members' trust and involvement.

Adapting Patton et al.'s (2017) suggestions for collecting online data, we propose a three-step process to collect and work with online data that will help studying gangs in the digital era: first, identifying the key terms and phrases that may be associated with gang culture and behaviour with gang members' collaboration; second, in order to refine the term list and to have an interpretation frame, the list obtained needs to be compared with other documents related to the studied gang (websites, texts); and third, based on the list of key terms, but also helped by gang members, public user accounts (in Twitter, Facebook and Instagram) and Facebook pages or groups can be detected. All personal data must be anonymized to protect the researched subjects. This process must include not only to anonymize the data that can lead to a profile identification, but also the text information itself. That is to say, the text of analysis (a tweet in Twitter or a post in Facebook or Instagram) must be paraphrased in any publication in order to avoid any possible subsequent prosecution of gang members. After the anonymization process, data can be quantitatively and qualitatively analysed. Quantitative analysis will allow researchers to detect the gang network, the relations between internal and external actors of the gang, the interests of gang members and the most used keywords, among others features. On the other hand, qualitative analysis, which implies coding all the data with the help of gang members and local researchers, will allow researchers to have a better understanding of social media uses

or topics discussed on social networks by gang members. The chosen analysis will vary depending on the aims of each research project.

4. Gangs members as informal/natural mediators

In many respects, it would not be unfair to suggest that there is always a high level of interest in young people when they are perceived to be a problem because their behaviour causes concern to those with power and influence (the recent urban disorders in the UK are a good example), when their actions are seen as posing a risk to themselves (through their use of alcohol or drugs, for example) or when there are concerns about social integration and economic efficiency (manifest in terms of high levels of long-term unemployment or mismatches in the supply and demands for labour).

(White 2013, p. 5)

“Conflict is key, and crime a possibility, an event, a contingency that, nonetheless, does not saturate the way of life and the ordinary organization of the group” (Queirolo Palmas 2017, p. 66). Gangs fighting each other and taking conflicts to the streets is one of the ideas in the collective imagination that first comes to mind when gangs are named. The process of how that conflict is managed, however, is less known. “Mediation is used when enforcement is ineffective, and the consequences of the feud are likely to be seen in spiralling tit-for-tat crimes based on business disputes, petty rivalries or issues over respect.” (Peachey 2014).

The position of gangs and gang members in mediation processes varies not only in each particular situation, society and conflict, but even during processes, as positions may easily vary from party to mediator. Focus groups carried out in Madrid at the end of 2018, showed the informal and intercultural role (trans) gangs perform for their newly arrived members: “Since the people living in communities are newcomers, language barriers and out-group prejudices they experience make them feel socially isolated” (Sánchez-Jankowski 2003, p. 204). The gang, through its senior members, may act as a bridge to reduce the culture shock for the members that have just recently arrived at the target society. From words and expressions that are different, to social ways, dealing with administrations or looking for a job, in many cases gang members take the role of “link-workers” for the members who need it. The “hidden curriculum” of members of

these transnational gangs includes abilities such as natural intercultural mediation, empathy and resilience, as well as first-hand knowledge of the origin culture and the migration experience.

Gangs as natural mediators appear here, although it is possible that these agents do not know that what is being performed is a mediation process, but when internal conflicts are solved without the need of drastic solutions, we can infer that the opposed factions have been able to reach an agreement. As in any other kind of association, from parent associations in schools to political parties, in a youth street organization there are as many opinions as members, and not all of them have the same strength within the group. Also, a respected member of the group or community usually has the role of a socially established mediator. Thus, however difficult it may be to comply with the principles of Western mediation, this leadership helps prevent major conflicts most of the time. This is why it is not unusual for the authorities to try to establish relationships with group leaders to gain access to the gang and to avoid larger consequences. In fact, experience tells us that when these groups are left without leadership due to persecution or imprisonment, far from disappearing or maintaining a low profile, the chaos caused by the most rebellious members can be amplified due to the lack of internal control.

In contexts where there is no or little state control, gangs can be found organizing basic aspects of everyday life, such as different groups selling goods in a market or occupying the public space. On many occasions the distribution does not follow power relations or the need to impose one group over the rest, but to an interest in avoiding conflict between groups. What has been called the “second economy,” has its own ways of management: “The second economy was only one component of the second society, which included a second public, a second culture, a second social consciousness and a second sphere of socio-political interactions. It was an interrelated sphere of alternative interests, organized along different principles” (Singerman 1995, p. 242).

In other occasions, gangs want to pacify/formalize their relationship with local/national administrations, and they need, in turn, a valid mediator: they have become a party. Regarding experiences of success and failure with gangs and mediation, both the relationships and the results of mediation processes will depend greatly on the sociocultural and political contexts of the settings in which the mediation takes place. There is, in a mediation process, an important lack of balance in power relationships that should not be underestimated, and that is key to how the process turns out: authorities here have the power of granting (or not) the legalization/recognition of the gang, while the gang's only strength is to offer their intention to denounce violence.

It is common for youth street groups to relate to each other beyond conflict and competitiveness, both among members and between two groups. Common backgrounds, shared public spaces and similar life experiences and expectations tend to bridge the gap. Where these characteristics appear, it is usual to find that either temporally or in the long term, gangs can reach agreements to work together in the pursuit of social benefits for their communities. This was the case, for example, during the earthquake in Mexico in 2017: youth street groups were among the first to collaborate in rescuing and helping victims. When a gang tries to "enter" the system, however, there are several inconveniences that not all members are ready to take on, from the loss of secrecy or invisibility, to distrust in authorities and administrations. With the realization that legalization is not a panacea for their everyday problems, some members can become more reticent about it. Young people in gangs, like young people in general, have future expectations, either positive or negative. When social conditions do not present them with attractive or at least viable ways of socio-economic progress, however, many members can get disappointed both with the process and with the system.

We can conclude here that mediation as a resource for conflict management is an interesting tool with possibilities for improving the relationships between the gang and its immediate

context, with other gangs, with authorities and even within the gang. This is approachable from many perspectives and possible to implement in any of the studied contexts due to its intersectionality and implementation possibilities. Moreover, it is important not to underestimate the ability members of the migrant community may have to act as mediators in benefit not only of their community, but of society as a whole. Too often in the past, local and national administrations have forgotten this, and the role of mediator has been filled by an expert in the field who belonged only to the receiving community.

5. Defining 2.0 Gangs: Beyond criminological perspectives

Anyone who has studied gangs over a period of time will admit that the more one studies them, the more complex they are. At best, we can come to understand a bit about certain features of gangs at given points of time. Gangs are dynamic, flexible and ever-changing.

(Sanders 1994, p. XI).

Pursuing current characteristics of 21st century gangs requires a renewed theoretical perspective that includes the use of social networks and the role of some members as mediators. Based on the evidences established from ethnographic research in diasporic situations, as in the case of the Latin Kings in Barcelona, we proposed the concept of ‘Gangs-In-Process’ (Feixa et al. 2008). This concept refers to groups in which networks and behaviours are at an incipient phase, even if media tend to identify them with criminal and durable organizations similar to the North American gang pattern. ‘Gangs-In-Process’ are street-oriented youth groups, with names, symbols and long-time traditions, composed by youths from deprived social backgrounds. Some of their members have connections with illegal activities, even if these activities are not part of the core group identity (Feixa et al. 2008, p. 65).

In order to make our contributions to the gang definition literature, and taking the idea of “gang in process” as a starting point, our theoretical perspective proposes to use the generic term ‘youth street group’ to refer to any gathering of young people—according to the definition of youth that exists in each context—who recognize themselves as a group and who use the public

space, physical or virtual, to meet. Adding the society-network context and the potential role of gang members as mediators to Thrasher’s classic definition, we propose considering the gang not as a sole model but as a ‘continuum’ (see Figure 1). At one extreme we would find, always ideally, the classic gangs based on illegal activities and not only formed by young people -like the *bacrim* in Colombia, the *maras* in El Salvador, the *tcharmil* in Marocco and the *quiquis* in Spain. At the other extreme, we would find youth subcultures based on leisure and economic activities -like the *vatos locos* in the Mexican American border; the heavies in Europe and the rappers in North Africa. In the middle there are a variety of hybrid groups that combine both strategies—like the *naciones* in Latin America, the *hittistes* in North Africa and the *bandas latinas* in Spain.

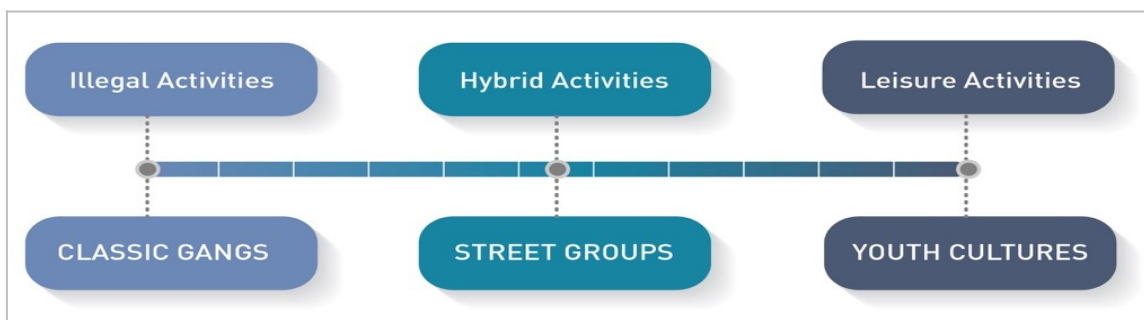


Figure 1. The TRANSGANG Continuum: gang identity not as a sole model but as a continuum.

Taking into account all the exposed reflections, we propose an update to the classic gang definition by adding the following nuances (in bold):

A **(transnational)** gang is an interstitial group originally formed spontaneously and later integrated through conflict. It is characterized by the following type of behaviour: face-to-face **(and online)** encounters, fights **(and fun)**, movement through space as if it were a unit **(and searches for intimate spaces)**, conflicts **(and alliances)** with similar groups and planning. The result of this collective behaviour is the development of a tradition, a non-reflexive internal structure **(and the establishment of rules to regulate exchanges with other gangs and institutions)**, esprit-de-corps, moral solidarity, group consciousness and an identity linked to territory **(in their homeland, in their new land or in cyberspace)**.

To further develop the new contributions (in bold), we may say that gangs in the digital age are characterized by:

- 1) **transnational connections** between countries of origin and diasporic situations, as consequences of migration processes. As the ethnographic works of Burawoy (1998, 2009) point out, there are global “forces, connections and imaginations” in which one can perceive, through deep observation, increasingly interconnected, though disparate, social realities. Today, the transnational connections can be more easily sustained thanks to the facilities of movement of persons, and to
- 2) private and public **online encounters** allowed by the wide diffusion of ICTs which break the sense of territory and time. The meetings can therefore be both offline or online. As a matter of fact, as seen before in this chapter, gang members’ behaviour on the digital sphere is now inevitably part of the gang identity as a group. On the other hand,
- 3) the activities of the gang are focused on **non-criminal activities**. Although, as individuals, gang members can commit delinquent acts, it does not imply that delinquency is the main *raison d’être* of the gang. In line with this argumentation and with one of the challenges previously detected in this chapter (see section 2) when facing the conceptualisation of gangs, we propose to reflect the collective awareness of the gang but also
- 4) the search for **intimate and individual spaces** that allow gang members develop their own yearnings. Again, as seen in the previous section about gangs as mediators, the hidden curriculum of members of these transnational gangs includes abilities such as resilience, resistance and intercultural mediation. Resilience as an affective, cognitive, relational and behavioural process that combines effective skills as a response to a situation of risk or adversity. And resistance as a (sub)cultural movement that opposes the dominant or hegemonic culture. Gangs question and -directly or indirectly- confront the established social order, which generates in them dissatisfaction, discomfort, frustration, indignation or resistance. This resistance can be translated into the capacity to

empower and transform their own lives and reality in a tangible and concrete way, building new social relationships and new ways of life. Some forms of resistance are channelled and materialized through the body, everyday objects, clothing, music, dance, parties, words, and aesthetic values, among others. The figure of gang members as natural mediators appears here and, consequently, gangs are capable to create

- 5) **alliances with other gangs and groups**, and also between society (institutions, police, citizens, social workers) and newcomer migrants or gang members themselves when arriving at the new context or country of reception. Gangs can not only mediate but also participate on
- 6) **processes of social recognition** (e.g., legalization, truces, interventions in media, cultural creativity experiences, etc) regardless where the gang is; and finally
- 7) developing **translocal territorial identities** and links defined by ITC and personal mobilities that trespass the national borders, creating a new “street-corner-society” in between the homeland, the new land and the cyberspace.

From this new adapted definition there are different indicators that allow an informal street youth association to be included as research subjects of gang studies. Unlike previous research, a gang can include deviant behaviour, but also nondeviant behaviour, people of different generations (adolescents and young-adults), genders (men, women and LGTBI), and ethnic, social and territorial origins. Consequently, their identity unit will be based on common rituals and symbols that form the basis of an imagined community that establishes limits for group membership (Barth, 1969). The proposed conceptualization and the theoretical operationalization make it possible to differentiate street gangs from organized crime or from transnational criminal organizations, including terrorist cells, but also from informal groups without stable organization, grouped exclusively around leisure. In short, we consider a gang as a dynamic cultural formation in a context of exclusion and social transformation. Youth street groups can

both evolve towards more associative, cultural, or sports forms, as well as specialize in some kind of crime.

6. Conclusion: gang research as an empowerment action

The usual policy of boy's work agencies has been to redirect the activities of existing gangs into wholesome channels by some sort of supervision. While this method is difficult and not always successful, its usefulness has been conclusively demonstrated by many Chicago agencies...

(Thrasher 1927/2013, p. 508)

The link of gang research with social intervention has been a continuous principle from the beginning of empirical investigations. Not by chance the fourth and last part of Thrasher's book, *The Gang* (1927/2013), is dedicated to "The Gang Problem," including an entire chapter entitled "Attacking the problem," in which he describes experiences of transforming the gang through agencies like the Young Men's Christian Association, the Boy Scouts of America, the settlements, the parks, the playgrounds, the Boy's Brotherhood Republic and Chicago's Boys Clubs. Even if the author recognized that "the politicians and saloon-keepers have also learned the trick of taking over these gangs and making clubs out of them, but their motives had usually been rather more for their own aggrandizement than for the good of the boys" (Thrasher 1927/2013, p. 510), he also pointed out the treatment of gang members as individuals. He dedicated the rest of his life to using education as a powerful tool to help street kids (Merico 2018; Rodgers 2017). The reformist approach of the Chicago School has been criticized by labelling theories and by critical criminology, but also by those approaches that only aim to "suppress gangs." Our research experiences among gangs are based on the principle of mutual respect, involved research and consensual intervention (Feixa et al. 2006; Queirolo Palmas 2016). Gang research should try to maintain a balance between resistance and resilience, starting from the principle that the goal is not to end gangs but to transform them from the inside and give an opportunity to their members.

As seen in this chapter, traditionally, a youth gang has been typically understood as a small delinquent group of young men based in a locality. The focus has been on crime and violence. Where there has been acknowledgement of larger-sized gangs with a greater geographical range, the emphasis has still been primarily on violence and crime. Less attention has been paid to migration (rural-urban, transnational) and to the economies of gangs; that is, how members and local communities gain a variety of benefits. Gangs have also shown specific cultural practices and creative outputs. These, too, require recognition and highlight the need of new ways of talking about transnational youth gangs in the global context.

This chapter set out to fill the gaps detected in the conceptualization of gang studies by proposing a new theoretical perspective. The definition we developed in this chapter is being implemented in the TRANSGANG project, and has strong implications for practitioners and professionals working in law enforcement, public policy, or with at-risk youth/young adults and for academic disciplines, such as Criminology, Social Work, Sociology or Anthropology interested in youth street groups. The definition **sets criminalization views aside and deals with inclusive and positive aspects of gang membership**, trying to positivate the marginalized position of gangs within the social structure. Some research focuses on proactive experiences in gang behaviour and policies (Leinfelt and Rostami 2011; Venkatesh 2009), but very few studies systematically compare such aspects in order to find variants and invariants in the evolution or in the reversal of the criminal gang model. Our theoretical position comes together with two new concepts when approaching the study of gangs: resilience and resistance. Our perspective aims to recognize **youth street groups as forms of youth culture to resist hegemonic discourses and practices and as social resilience institutions to deal with and fight against stigmatization**. Here, researchers have room to participate in this process including gang members as the main protagonists when researching 21st century gangs. This approach responds to the general concern among ethnographers that research should not use informants simply as sources of information;

but rather, from an ethical perspective, the research should serve the interests of those who agree to participate. In this way, the **research process is transformed into empowering social action for young group members through their involvement in the entire research process** from the very beginning until the presentation of results. Although it is unclear if empowerment is a reality for those who participate in research or just an outcome of the researcher's imagination, our ambition is to make visible youth street group members as agents of mediation.

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