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CHAPTER 6

Teenage Gossip and the Presentation of Self

THE NEED TO ESTABLISH a violent reputation can, quite naturally, cause one to engage in violent acts. Often, gang members slowly develop reputations by interacting with a variety of people. Within the context of these social relationships, a single violent act or a series of violent acts can provide the basis for building a reputation. Yet gang members must broadcast their capacity for violence beyond their immediate social circle, which remains a significant challenge. Loosely connected but extensive social ties maximize the diffusion of information, and, as noted in the last chapter, gangs' and gang members' capacity to become known is largely based on the expansiveness of their social network. This chapter examines the type of information that is often spread through gang networks. Gang members frequently use their varied social contacts to receive and transmit street gossip. These interpersonal networks produce a continuously flowing channel of information that functions as an important tool for developing and managing reputations.

Controlling a reputation through street gossip is a constant endeavor, since the flow of information in the streets frequently changes. Few, if any, reputations are universally accepted in the intergang environment, and all can be altered. The pursuit of legitimacy through building a reputation for violence involves an ongoing process whereby the illegitimate can become accepted, and the legitimate can be rejected. Within the vast network of intergang interactions that constitute the intergang environment, gangs and gang members are the focus of both positive and negative information. They can be labeled as weak just as quickly as they can be labeled as violent. Gang members with broad social

networks and well-established reputations have a greater capacity to influence perceptions of both themselves and others. When compared to their less-connected or less-violent peers, these well-connected gang members are considered legitimate by a greater percentage of environmental participants. However, assessments of legitimacy can change, so gang members remain heavily invested in manipulating the information that circulates through street gossip. Being known in the streets can be beneficial, but only if one is viewed as being a legitimate gang member. Gang members who are labeled as illegitimate are often the targets of widespread derision. They are victims of the dilution narrative, and gang members are heavily motivated to avoid this unfortunate position.

TEENAGE GOSSIP AND DISCUSSIONS OF VIOLENCE

On another warm summer day, I accompanied Shawn and Layboy to an apartment complex where fellow DFW Boy Lil' Crazy resided. Aaron, the boys' older brother, and Lonnie, another DFW Boy who frequently participated in my research endeavors, accompanied us. Lil' Crazy was on house arrest for bringing a gun to school, and the boys tried to stop by his place whenever possible. I also liked these occasional visits, as Lil' Crazy was a sixteen-year-old who loved to talk, and those around him often followed suit. He, like many gang members, embraced a self-characterization that paralleled the values of street and his clique yet set him apart from his peers. He claimed to be the crazy one in the clique:

It's like, you know how you got your friends, you got your cool friends, your laid-back friends, and the friends who just don't give a fuck. That's what I am, the one that just don't give a damn about nothing. You feel me? See a nigga, "Hey man I don't like him." "You want me to split [beat up] him, you want me to knock him out?" Then I just run over there and "Bop," lay him out. He's out. That's why they call me Lil' Crazy, the crazy one out of the clique, DFW Boy for life. I'm just the crazy one. . . . Like how they is [Shawn, Layboy, Lonnie, and Aaron], they don't give a shit to a certain extent. Me, shit, I slap motherfuckers around if I don't know you. We be walking down the street, whooping niggas' asses

or whatever, shit like that. But I do shit out of the blue. We just be walking around we ain't even splitting [beating] anybody today, and I just be walking and "Pow." They just look at me, "What you just do that for man? That was unnecessary." [Everyone laughs]. I don't know. There's just something wrong with my anger problems and shit. Like when I get in that mood and just want to hit something, see a nigga walking down the street, "You, come here." But like me, I slap on grown people. If you run your mouth you get busted. There ain't no talking it out or shit like that.

Other DFW Boyz also liked to provide characterizations of themselves, but they did so in less colorful terms. These self-descriptions always seemed tied to one's role in or approach to potentially violent situations. Shawn, who once described himself as being copacetic, embraced an identity of being the intelligent one, most likely to observe and analyze a situation before acting. Layboy was the muscle and the one who quickly resorted to physical violence. When asked why, he seemed to have little insight into his personality, replying, "I don't know, that's just me." Their younger brother Dre often instigated confrontations by "running his mouth." When asked why, he simply replied, "'Cause that's me. I rap [talk shit]. Just having fun . . . but I ain't the type of person that will get things started and not fight you." A large part of the boys' lives, from their individual and group identity to their routine daily conversations, focused on violence.

The centrality of violence in gang members' lives reflected a need to build and maintain an acceptable reputation within the intergang environment. However, these reputations were not simply the natural derivatives of violent events. They evolved as a continuous flow of information was transmitted from person to person through street gossip. If violent episodes birthed reputations, street gossip then worked to spread and solidify reputations. Each gang member was heavily invested not only in violence but also in controlling the characterizations that stemmed from a violent or potentially violent episode. As gang members interacted with peers, they worked to access and manipulate the information being spread throughout the intergang environment. They heard new information about events in the streets or about other gang members. They participated in the dissemination of information by

telling stories about or providing characterizations of other gangs or gang members. Perhaps most importantly, they used the flow of information to transmit a self-image that was intimately attached to violent behavior.

Clarifying the Environment and Gaining New Information

As we stood outside Lil' Crazy's apartment, our discussion quickly transformed from an interview to a natural conversation between associates. The boys seemed to forget that my tape recorder was on and began to discuss their social environment. It was a conversation similar to many others that I had heard. Members of the DFW Boyz continuously focused on the people and events in their social world. During such conversations, the boys reinforced the rules of the street, disseminated information, and presented and evaluated self-characterizations.

"Nowadays, people be talking about Post [Road], but they ain't been there, they just moved there," said Aaron.

"False claiming hoods and shit like that," agreed Lil' Crazy.

Aaron agreed, and explained how some false claimers were able to get away with their fraudulent claims. "They get cool with everybody over there, so everybody want to have his back. Talking about being from Post Road and you really ain't."

"You say you from where?" countered Lil' Crazy, as if he was talking to someone claiming Post Road. "Nah, you ain't from the hood. This nigga ain't from my ghetto. That's how we call niggas out down here, I'm telling you. Niggas rap and shit, and you tell them smash [quit] all that."

Aaron looked at me and said, "The dudes you going to interview, that's my little squad. There's four of us, and every one of us got their own squad. I run with the niggas you seen, all those niggas from Chicago. That's my little squad. I got a couple that be on their own shit, but if something go down I can call them up. One of my niggas got a lot of niggas from his hood. I just mess with a lot of people that know a lot of people. Like, if I get into it with somebody, I call up this dude and then Post Road is over there. He known in Post Road, so all he do is got to make a call and that's when all the cars surround. That's why I'm cool with a person in down near every hood, so I don't get into it with hood niggas. I get into it with lame-ass niggas that want to roll around in their

cars and stunting and shit.” (“Stunting” refers to an outward display of toughness that has no merit.)

“Stunting and all that shit,” agreed Lil’ Crazy. “Those are the types of niggas I get at with the heater [gun].”

During only a few minutes of conversation, Aaron and Lil’ Crazy established two important elements of street life in Indianapolis. First, labeling someone as illegitimate provided gang members an internal justification for acting violently. Although it was difficult to determine if Lil’ Crazy actually shot at “stunters,” or if Aaron limited his aggression to “lame-ass niggas,” they were both adding to the dilution narrative and providing a moral to the story. In short, violence was an appropriate form of retribution for fraudulent gang members. Second, gang members negotiated a skeptical intergang environment by establishing informal social relationships with relevant street participants throughout the city. Aaron benefited from his relatively loose associations with the members of his squad. Those loose ties produced a more expansive social network, as each squad member routinely associated with people outside the clique (see Granovetter 1973 and 1983). Aaron was, therefore, known to people in different hoods, and he had access to a wide range of people who would assist him when needed. The only problem that could arise from these relationships was when someone substituted informal association for genuine belonging. Aaron might have been associated with selected individuals from Post Road, but he could not claim Post Road. If he had claimed Post Road, his associates might have mediated the subsequent consequences, but other peers would have still viewed him as falsely representing the hood. Some youths in Indianapolis made this mistake, as they tried to build their reputations by name-dropping and then used those contacts to establish legitimacy. They did this most often when they were unable to establish a proper reputation independently and tried to gain a reputation through false association.

“You don’t catch me getting into it with anybody that like, ‘4-duece on, 4-duece on [Forty-second street],” continued Aaron. “I’m cool with everybody, but them dime-life niggas. I don’t like none of them. I don’t fuck with Tenth Street at all. Them like the East Side Boyz, that’s what they call themselves.”

“They run their mouth too much.” agreed Lil’ Crazy, providing a clearly negative description of Tenth Street. “Like, down here, it’s

cliques and hoods. You got some niggas from Chicago that is reppin' [representing] gangs and shit like that. But down here in Nap [Indianapolis] it's like hoods and cliques. You can be a GD in the same clique with a Vice Lord down here."

Reinforcing the role of informal social relationships in Indianapolis, Aaron added, "They [Indianapolis gang members] don't care about that really, they just care if you his nigga or not."

Lil' Crazy agreed, "If you loyal to your set that you reppin'. Like Shawn and Layboy, he [Layboy] Vice Lord and his big brother [Shawn] is GD. But you see, they're still together, they still family."

Noting the difference between Chicago and Indianapolis, Aaron added, "'Cause in Chicago they really do all that. If you a GD and you a Vice Lord we going to go at it. But down here you could be a Vice Lord or GD, whatever, and be still hanging together and shit like that. People down here, they don't really care about all that. They just care about what hood you from."

"What clique you claim," agreed Lil' Crazy. This was the most salient issue in Indianapolis.

Aaron shifted the conversation back to local gangs by telling us some newer street gossip. "You could walk the Baltimore apartments, and I heard those niggas starting to get crazy. Where they be like 'Where you from?'"

Shawn entered into the conversation by further validating his brother's information. "Ah yeah. All those niggas 'on the five' anyways [Vice Lords]. They [say] if you a regular, and it gets up [to have problems], they'll get the choppers [Tech 9, a small semiautomatic firearm] and all. I know a lot of niggas over there."

Apparently, even a widely respected hood had problems with false flaggers. "They got some people that come over there that ain't even from the Balt," responded Aaron, implying again that people falsely represent affiliations.

"Don't even know who you are," agreed Shawn. Everyone in the streets, after all, knew him. He was known. To Shawn, other people's ignorance was a sign of their illegitimacy.

The flow of information in this conversation was bi-directional; each member of the DFW Boyz contributed and received new information about other groups or hoods. Some basic characterizations had been

presented and accepted within the group. Tenth Street talked too much, the Baltimore apartments was a serious hood, and false flaggers were ubiquitous and deserved retribution. This information would likely have been passed on to a broader network of DFW Boyz or other associates, and it would have helped shape reality in the street of Indianapolis.

Gossiping About Others

As the boys continued to talk, their conversation transitioned from a discussion about general hoods to one that focused on specific people in the intergang environment. Such conversations typically involved a process in which the group discussed selected individuals and then summarily disparaged them. Although this process resembled more generic versions of teenage gossip, the content and consequences of these conversations were quite abnormal. They often relied on the dilution narrative to openly criticize peers, while they also built or reinforced their own reputations for violence.

Gossip is not unique to gang life; it is common in all areas of society and is especially common in adolescent social circles. Indeed, gossip is, a universal social process that facilitates emotions and behavior in many different contexts. The function of gossip in social life can also be wide-ranging. For example, scholars studying aggression note that gossip can be used as a form of social or relational aggression that is intended to damage a peer's social relationships, self-esteem, or social status (Crick and Grotpeter 1995; Galen and Underwood 1997; Underwood 2003). Gossip can be used as a nonphysical instrument that is designed to humiliate peers and undermine relationships between close peers (Crick 1996 and 1997). Although such aggression is not overt or physical, the consequences for the victim can be severe. Sustained exposure to relational aggression can cause the victim to withdraw from social interactions, to negatively alter his or her self-image, or to struggle with various psychological illnesses like depression (Crick and Bigbee 1998; Hawker and Boulton 2000; Prinstein, Boergers, and Vernberg 2001). Gossip can also lead to anger and an underlying desire to retaliate against peers (Crick and Bigbee 1998). Given that many gang members are teenagers, some of their behaviors are age appropriate and common in other teenage social settings. Still, these generic social processes can help facilitate atypical behavior.

Within the DFW Boyz, gossip was, in part, used as a form of social aggression. Rather than seeking to damage a peer's personal relationships, members of the DFW Boyz used gossip to publicly question a peer's status as a real gang member. They sought to humiliate their peers by disseminating negative information through channels of street gossip. To do this, they relied heavily on the beliefs emanating from the dilution narrative to openly question a peer's rightful place in the intergang environment. More importantly, the group established characterizations of specific gang members that became part of the street knowledge base. This is not to suggest that everyone in the intergang environment embraced the statements made by a few DFW Boyz. Rather, the characterizations created during informal conversations between friends dispersed into the gossip channel and led to questions about the legitimacy of a given person. In the struggle to maintain one's reputation, this information could be damaging, and it could both insight anger and force one to seek a method of reversing the negative stigma.

Although gossip can be used to inflict social harm on victims, it also serves other functions within the group. Gary Allen Fine (1986) argues that gossip in adolescent social settings helps establish moral codes and standards for acceptable behavior. Within a small group, youths can reach a consensus about appropriate behavior by talking about, and ultimately evaluating, the actions and/or characteristics of peers. Most notably, they castigate peers by labeling them as being morally defective or constitutionally unable to abide by acceptable behavioral standards. The targets of gossip are then used as a standard for what not to do in a given social environment. Like most teenagers, the gang members in this study used gossip to establish boundaries of acceptable behavior, though their understanding of acceptability was somewhat different than that of their non-gang peers. Through gossip, they creatively established what was and what was not appropriate behavior in the streets of Indianapolis. The labels of wannabe, false flagger, or fake gang member provided ideal models of unacceptable behavior that helped clarify what was acceptable.

Some gang scholars have already noted that gossip is instrumental to establishing a gang's collective sense of identity. Ann Campbell (1987), for example, observed that female gang members used gossip as a means to reject peers and solidify a gang's identity. They gained a sense of self by contrasting their behavior with the inappropriate behavior of other

females in their social setting. Although talking about peers establishes the boundaries of acceptable behavior within the group, it also provides an image of the group to outsiders. In fact, for the DFW Boyz, gossiping about peers effectively communicated the group's defining characteristics to loosely affiliated peers. If the group mocked a peer for falsely claiming a hood, clique, or gang affiliation, an outsider could infer that the group's claims were authentic. If the members of the DFW Boyz criticized a group for being soft, outsiders could assume that the DFW Boyz were tough. In a skeptical social environment, where one's social standing was based on his or her ability to establish a violent reputation, denigrating others through gossip was an important tool for clarifying and reinforcing that reputation.

As my conversation with Shawn, Layboy, Aaron, Lonnie, and Lil' Crazy continued, the boys began to disparage some of their peers.

Aaron said, "I got into it with a dude named Shorty."

With that, both Shawn and Lil' Crazy flippantly shouted, "That nigga's from north-north, slap him!"

Layboy added, "They be protecting them, too, false claiming hood niggas, protecting them."

"That nigga is from Post Road. I seen him," said Aaron as he mimicked someone vouching for Shorty, protecting him from harm.

"Like half of them niggas that live on Post is just living over there," agreed Lil' Crazy. "And they got cool with the motherfuckers."

Aaron mocked, "I call them dick riders. Dick rider, you move into the hood and start claiming, because you don't want to get your ass beat over there. It's a dick rider."

This trend was a source of great frustration for the boys. Temporary residence in a hood was not a sufficient standard for claiming hood affiliation. Instead, it was viewed as a pathetic attempt to build a reputation through false pretenses. The DFW Boyz did not consider Shorty a real gang member. The phrase "north-north" implied that Shorty was originally from an area too far north to be considered a real hood. As such, he had no rightful claim to any serious hood affiliation. According to the gang, Shorty was illegitimate and undoubtedly weak. Shorty himself probably did not take this subjective rule about his hood affiliation seriously and most likely viewed himself to be a real gang member, believing that if hood members accepted him as being a part of the hood,

then outsiders should also accept him. Yet the conversation was both the product of and a contributor to the channel of gossip that flowed through the streets. The DFW Boyz characterized Shorty as a dick rider and questioned his legitimacy as a gang member. If such labels gained momentum in the intergang environment, Shorty would have to adapt by disproving the labels or by admitting his weakness and looking foolish.

Lil' Crazy cited another specific example, "I know a nigga over there named Tyrone. This nigga all the way from the west side, and he moved in Sutton Place, and now he's claiming Post. You can't do that."

Lonnie, who had been quiet in this conversation, jumped in, "Like that dude from Naptown Boyz, what's his name, C-Money?"

As soon as Lonnie mentioned C-Money, the entire group feverishly gossiped about how C-Money was falsely representing his hood affiliation. Lil' Crazy dismissed the opposing clique member, "He's from Twenty-ninth, man, and I don't even know if he's really from Twenty-ninth. He's my blood, but shit, you feel me? And that's another clique we into it with, Naptown Boyz."

Shawn further disparaged the Naptown Boyz, "Them guys need to watch their shit, bro', they scared, bro'."

"I know when I was locked up," replied Lil' Crazy. "I was locked up with a few of them little niggas. My cousin in the clique or whatever. I told him, shit, when it all boils down to it, he's choosing them niggas over family. So I tell him, 'When we get at your clique you're going to be the first one I knock out.' You my blood and everything, but you choose those niggas over family, so shit, fuck it. You can get your ass ran up along with them niggas . . . they ain't even that deep [they don't have access to large numbers of supporters]. That's why I didn't go when you all went with Lonnie. It ain't even really that deep. 'Cause I like to get buck wild when I fight, and I get out of control. Like, real out of control. Like stomp your head on the ground."

The Naptown Boyz were a source of anger for the DFW Boyz, and for Lonnie in particular. The day before this conversation, members of the Naptown Boyz had outnumbered Lonnie in his apartment complex and tried to beat him up. This incident was part of the only ongoing street conflict that surfaced during my time with the DFW Boyz. The moralistic overtones that surrounded this conflict were intimately tied to

issues of legitimacy. The boys viewed the Naptown Boyz as a group of wannabes who spent their days acting tough, “talking shit” online, and backing up their talk only when the numbers were in their favor. They were the quintessential group that violated almost every supposed rule embraced by members of the DFW Boyz. The Naptown Boyz were frauds, and they deserved retribution.

The confidence exuded by Shawn and Lil’ Crazy reflected both their belief in the DFW Boyz and an underlying skepticism that the Naptown Boyz were legitimate gang members. Such an assessment could only reflect an assumption loosely based on reputation. The street beef had not evolved beyond some minor confrontations, and the DFW Boyz could only make an assumption about the capabilities of the other clique. The only way they could verify their assumption was to confront the Naptown Boyz and force them to either act violently or back down. In any case, the DFW Boyz had developed a characterization of the Naptown Boyz that was likely to be transmitted throughout the intergang environment. The DFW Boyz did not take the Naptown Boyz seriously, and everyone would know this soon enough. The precursors of intergang conflict had been established earlier, and momentum for the conflict was building as members of the DFW Boyz collectively labeled their counterparts and spread negative information about them throughout the intergang environment. I suspected, although I could not verify it, that the Naptown Boyz were having similar conversations about the DFW Boyz.

Presentation of Self

Up to this point in the conversation, Shawn, Layboy, Aaron, Lonnie, and Lil’ Crazy had developed characterizations of multiple groups and individuals, but they mostly left themselves out of the conversation. As they discussed the Naptown Boyz, they began to develop violent self-characterizations. If they were claiming that the Naptown Boyz were weak, they had to demonstrate that the DFW Boyz were strong. During conversations gang members often develop violent self-images and communicate these self-characterizations to peers around them. Often, the development of a violent self-image can be accomplished by revisiting past events that properly display one’s capacity for violence. During this conversation I was the audience, but in other

conversations the boys had the attention of relatively unfamiliar or loosely affiliated peers.¹ These contacts were vital to the spread and solidification of their reputations.

“We don’t call the troops unless we need them,” said Shawn. “We go over there about ten deep and we cool with that. It starts getting ugly, we get twenty to fifty and starting making the phone calls. Tell peeps to bring the goons. He come about one hundred strong. Big bro’.”

Being deep, or having access to large numbers of gang members who were willing and able to help in a conflict, was vital to Indianapolis gang members. The more people they could pull into a situation, the stronger they were as a group. It is difficult to determine how many people Shawn, Layboy, and the DFW Boyz could have accessed in a given situation. Their recollections of numbers seemed exaggerated to me.

The number of people involved in an incident dramatically shaped the interpretation of the situation. Being outnumbered during a conflict usually reduced an individual’s desire to pursue a violent outcome, and it might have caused him or her to defer to the adversary. When the numbers favored someone, he or she was more willing to follow through on threats of violence. Interestingly, retrospective accounts of these incidents were skewed to make the storytellers appear strong and their counterparts weak. If, for example, the DFW Boyz outnumbered another group, they retold the story in a way that affirmed the group’s strength. In such a situation, their depth was evidence of group superiority. When numbers were not in their favor, however, the DFW Boyz retold the story to make the other group appear weak. After all, only cowards needed eight people to beat up two DFW Boyz. This was an indication of a weak group merely trying to act like a gang. Such contradictions in the DFW Boyz stories were common and largely reflected the agendas of gang members.

Layboy revisited a previous observation that many so-called gang members could not back up their tough image. “There be niggas that stunt, and niggas that want to run off at the mouth.”

“Like dude I got into a fight with,” remembered Aaron. “He says he’s from Haughville, don’t nobody know that nigga though. I don’t care, you can be from Haughville, I’ll fight any of you all. I don’t care.”

Lil' Crazy agreed, and added to his self-characterization, "That's the thing about me. I done beat up niggas from my hood. Niggas get greasy [not abiding by the "rules"] over there. They robbing niggas that's from the same hood and shit like that. I done beat the hell out of niggas that's from my hood. You see, I'll fight niggas from every single hood. I don't give a fuck."

"That's what I do," replied Layboy, as if he was trying to keep up with the statements made by Lil' Crazy.

"But I'm cool with a whole bunch of hoods," acknowledged Lil' Crazy. "I'm telling you, that's why they say I'm the crazy one." He then continued to talk about C-Money, from the Naptown Boyz. "He need a slap for real. And the thing that crack me up 'cause he little. Telling you, that's the thing. I'm the littlest nigga, but I love to fight big boy. I don't like to fight little bitty dudes like my size. I like fighting nothing but big dudes. Telling you, I like breaking noses and shit."

"Like when your brother got into it with that big dude," replied Layboy.

"Yeah," Lil' Crazy affirmed. "Like when my brother beat up someone that was from 'The Bricks' [an apartment complex]."

"Smashed him," verified Shawn.

"Got to running his mouth and shit like that," explained Lil' Crazy. "I'm like, shit, I don't give a fuck how old you are, you a grown man, I don't give a damn. We'll still knock your big ass out."

"He was scared," mocked Shawn.

Lil' Crazy continued, "To make a long story short, my brother ended up grabbing him out, whooped his ass real bad."

"In front of all of his people, they all watched him get beat up," added Shawn.

Lil' Crazy agreed. "Embarrassed him in front of his whole little hood. Watched him get his shit busted. And they just standing there like, 'damn.' 'Cause they already knew what would happen if they would have hit my brother, you feel me?"

Aaron reentered the conversation by proudly stating that Indianapolis was a serious gang city, even if smaller cliques were more common than larger and more organized gangs. "That's how we do it down here. No GDs or Vice Lords, you out here in the hood, you banging out here, there ain't going to be none of that 'on the five,' 'on the six.' Don't

nobody do that shit down here. That's why in Chicago you hear them saying, 'Man there ain't no real gangsters,' but you can't really say that just because people don't do that gang shit down here. Talking like, 'You ain't real.'"

Lil' Crazy added, "Yeah, and that's the thing, like how people is from Chicago. Yeah, they really strict about their gang shit, and they know all their lists and shit up there. Half of the people down here, we know our lists and shit like that, too, because we done got blessed in or we done got jumped in VL or GD, or whatever gang that you in. Like, some niggas from Chicago come down here, and you claiming Vice Lord. They think you false flagging. Just because you ain't from Chicago and shit like that. Like, motherfuckers think it don't be crashing [getting violent] down here in Naptown."

The subjectively formed notion of an intergang field extended beyond the boundaries of Indianapolis. Only a three-hour drive from Indianapolis, Chicago was home to the original and more organized versions of the Gangster Disciples and Vice Lords. Indianapolis gang members frequently compared themselves to the gangs in Chicago and resented the notion that they were somehow inferior to their bigger-city counterparts to the north. Indianapolis gangs might have been less organized than Chicago gangs, but they were still legitimate gangs. The parameters of the intergang environment were virtually endless. Even if a group were universally known in Indianapolis, its status as a gang would be doubtful when exposed to nonlocals. In Indianapolis, this trend was most noticeable between Indianapolis and Chicago gang members, but it extended to other cities as well. Familiarity bred certainty, but interactions with relatively unknown persons generated skepticism.

Aaron added, "That's why I say you see niggas come down here and get their ass whooped."

"Every time," agreed Shawn.

Lil' Crazy again boasted, "We done beat up guys from Chicago. We cool with niggas from Chicago, but me and my brothers beat up some motherfuckers that came down here from Gary, Chicago, all that. That's when motherfuckers mistaken. They don't think Naptown [Indianapolis] crash because we ain't all on TV and shit like that. Once they come down here, they see how we get down."

"It's over," agreed the confident Layboy.

Lil' Crazy began to laugh and recounted a game they used to play. "We catch your ass walking down the street and it's this thing, well I call it 'see a nigga split a nigga.' That's what you call it. 'See a nigga split a nigga day.' That's when you walk down the street with your niggas out, doing shit and all that, and, you see a nigga that you want to split. You like, 'Shit, fuck it.' See a nigga split a nigga day. You see a nigga. You split him. It don't matter who he is. He could be a motherfucking grown ass dude. Shit, get his ass whooped."

"I told you," interrupted Aaron, "like dude from St. Louis. He was down here but a couple years ago. He was on a bus, and I guess he said, 'Fuck Haughville.' 'Cause he was from St. Louis. Everybody on the whole bus looked at him stupid. But me, I wasn't about to hit him cause of that. I was about to hit him because he kept rapping [talking shit]. I don't give a fuck. He can say fuck Haughville. I ain't trippin'."

"My nigga from Kenwood [apartments] was like, 'You going to let that nigga say that bro?'"

"So I was like, 'On my daddy I'm going to split you.' He thought I was going to hit him the same day, so he watching his back. I'm like, I'm going to get that nigga when he ain't paying attention. The next morning, you know, when it be morning but it be dark outside, I'm on the bus easing my shit off. Then I just got up. Pop. I'm like, 'Nigga, where you from?'"

"'I'm from the Lou' [everyone is laughing].' I'm banging him."

"Then my nigga from Kenwood jump up, 'Nigga this is for my hood.' Bap, bap, bap, we banging this nigga on the bus. Bus driver didn't do nothing."

"This nigga get off the bus, and everybody at breakfast talking about him. He just sitting there, looking stupid."

"'I'm trying to graduate.' Trying to graduate?'"

Apparently, the excuse of trying to graduate hit a nerve with the five DFW Boyz involved in this conversation, as they all simultaneously said, in some form or another, "That's everybody's excuse."

"People be lying and shit, 'Ah, I'm under contract [a formal agreement about behavior in school], if I get in any fights I get expelled and I'm trying to graduate,'" explained Lil' Crazy. "See me, I don't give a damn. They put me under every single kind of contact, and I still be whooping niggas' asses. 'Cause I don't give a damn. That's the thing

about me though. Like how motherfuckers see me out and shit, at parties, we banging with motherfuckers and all of that. I'm bad [act poorly] in school, but when it comes down to schoolwork I'm acing it every time. Telling you it's not a problem for me. Motherfuckers see me and be like, 'Damn, why the hell you act like this when you got damn near all As and Bs?' Because I just don't give a fuck, just don't give a fuck. Motherfuckers in school, boy, that's the best place to embarrass them."

"That cafeteria," agreed Shawn, as he provided another reminder that public spaces filled with teenagers were ideal for establishing a reputation. Each observer was capable of transmitting information to peers.

Lil' Crazy offered another example. "Like I done broke this nigga's nose, and he had on snatch-out golds [fake teeth or 'grill']. I done broke his nose and his golds with two hits one time when I was in school. Fucked him up bad."

"Why?" This was the first question I had asked in a long time.

"'Cause he was yip-yapping at the mouth," replied Lil' Crazy.

Aaron added, "That's what they do, they think you in school so you ain't going to hit them."

"And that's the thing," Lil' Crazy explained further. "He be by the police officer rappin'."

Lonnie ended his silence. "I hate it when they do that shit. That's pussy shit."

Lil' Crazy continued, "I'm like, 'All right, when we get outside of school I'm knocking you out.'"

"Is that the dude by the busses I was talking about?" asked Aaron as he laughed.

"Yeah, I cocked back real far and boom, hit him in the nose. Hit him in his mouth, gold fall out break in half. Like how I am, motherfuckers been rappin' and I know he's been rappin' there's no coming up and asking. I'm hitting you off the tops."

This was the image that gang members wanted to express to peers. "I am willing and able to use violence, and if you question me or test me I will not hesitate to respond with violence." If peers heard this conversation and accepted it as accurate, no one would have questioned the legitimacy of Shawn, Layboy, Lonnie, Aaron, or Lil' Crazy. The DFW Boyz would be viewed as a legitimate gang worthy of respect. Moreover, they would presumably broaden the reputation of the DFW

Boyz by diffusing this information into their personal networks. If this happened, a growing number of street participants would hear that the DFW Boyz were down for whatever.

A DEGREE OF REALISM

Gang members are violent. When compared to their peers, they are more likely both to engage in violent behavior and to be the victims of violence (Battin et al. 1998; Esbensen and Huizinga 1993; Esbensen and Weerman 2005; Gatti et al. 2005; Huff 2004; Melde, Taylor, and Esbenson 2009; Taylor 2007; Taylor, Feng et al. 2008; Taylor, Peterson et al. 2008; Thornberry et al. 1993 and 2003). Hanging out with gang members can certainly give one the impression that violence is a routine part of their lives. The dialogue between Layboy, Shawn, Aaron, Lonnie, and Lil' Crazy is merely one of many day-to-day conversations between members of the DFW Boyz. They also told numerous stories about violent incidents that I believed to be relatively accurate, though skewed in their favor. Some stories focused on severe beatings, while others recounted collective efforts to intimidate other gangs through mass displays of weapons. However, these conversations and stories do not provide an accurate depiction of the daily lives of gang members. They merely represent reinterpreted highlights of past incidents that develop an identity in response to a skeptical environment. The pursuit of being known is grounded in these violent episodes, but gang members use them to create an exaggerated violent self-image. The reality of gang members' lives is relatively monotonous. Violence occurs only sporadically. Gang members present themselves to be more violent than they actually are.

This contrast between a gang member's behavior and his or her public persona does not mean that occasional acts of violence are trivial. Nor does it mean that discussions of violence and street gossip are inconsequential to the behavior of gang members. There are a number of relatively severe problems caused by the dissemination of such information into the broader social environment. First, the conversations reinforce a general expectation within the intergang environment that gangs are inherently violent. As self-defined gang members interact and regale each other with these self-characterizations and stories of violence, they define how things should be in the streets. Individuals unable to live up

to expectations, however vague, are delegitimized. Self-defined gang members who are demonstrably willing and able to use violence are lauded, while those who are only mimicking a proclivity for violence are openly rebuked. Thus, the expectations of violence embraced by gang members are commonly discussed, exaggerated, and then transmitted back to the intergang environment. Violence in the intergang environment is indeed a self-sustaining subcultural expectation.²

Second, the management of their gang identity places strong pressures on gang members to live up to their reputations. Although the process used to broaden and strengthen one's reputation can insulate someone from the dilution narrative, in some circumstances it can also force an individual to respond with violence. If a self-proclaimed violent gang member responds passively to a challenge, physical confrontation, or incident of public ridicule, his or her reputation is at risk. A self-defined gang member who readily submits to an adversary will probably create an explanation for this passive behavior that will neutralize his or her vulnerability among his or her closest associates. However, other peers will begin to talk, and that information will disperse throughout the intergang environment. Rumors about the incident will grow and the individual may increasingly be labeled as a wannabe, false flagger, or stunter. This problem is increasingly accentuated the more he or she talks about his or her violent exploits. Self-defined gang members who frequently talk about their violent endeavors without actually demonstrating a willingness and ability to engage in violence are despised in the streets. When challenged, physically confronted, or publicly ridiculed, the gang member with a violent reputation must respond with violence. Failure to do so will lead to a growing belief that the person's seemingly violent reputation is just a façade, and that he or she is just a wannabe. Gang members face constant pressure to prevent this from happening.

Third, gang members do not just develop self-characterizations. They also openly gossip about peers in their social environment, which often fuels intergang conflict. The intergang environment is characterized by an endless flow of gossip and information transmitted between teenagers. Those involved in this gossip channel are the creators and recipients of petty, mean-spirited, and childish information that is intended to disparage other gang members. All participants in the intergang environment become transmitters of this information, and all can

be victims of this information. Negative or dismissive information spreads through the streets and is often carried back to those individuals or groups that are the targets of criticism. Such information often precedes intergang conflict. Individuals from different gangs observe each other in social settings. They watch and listen to each other. Characterizations are presented, accepted or rejected, and then transmitted through social relationships. Gang members note the negative comments made by others in their environment. They are aware that another group is calling them weak, soft, or fake. They know when they have been labeled as a false flagger, a dick rider, or a wannabe. This awareness breeds animosity and demands action. It represents the infancy of intergang conflict.

CONCLUSION

Legitimacy in the intergang environment is not static; gang members continuously develop reputations for violence by telling stories or gossiping about peers. The intergang environment is host to an endless stream of information designed to both build and undermine reputations. Violent or potentially violent events become distorted as they are reconstructed to fit the agendas of the storyteller. Some self-defined gang members are labeled as weak, while others are labeled as strong. This constant flow of information pressures gang members to perform in front of their peers. Circulating gossip that strips away the believability of their violent reputation can victimize even those known for violence. As a result, the struggle for legitimacy and the enduring need to control one's reputation is a constant endeavor in the streets of Indianapolis.

Of course the use of gossip to build or dismantle reputations is not unique to gang life. Researchers have long noted that gossip is common to many different social settings (see Eder and Enke 1991; Fine 1986; Gluckman 1963; Goodwin 1980; Paine 1967), and one can reasonably suggest that non-gang members also voraciously gossip about peers. The use of gossip by Layboy, Shawn, and their associates should remind the reader that the boys are, quite simply, adolescents struggling to find their place in a meaningful social environment. In this respect, they are very similar to the hordes of teenagers who navigate the petty and, at times, mean-spirited social world of middle school and high school.³ They are invested in what peers think of them, but they also contribute to their environment by gossiping and spreading rumors about peers. Amid

discussions of violence and crime, outsiders may be tempted to mislabel gang members as being wholly different from their non-gang members or nonoffending peers, but this is not entirely accurate.

What is different about gang members' struggle is not their fixation on a peer environment, their concern for reputations, or their use of gossip, but rather the socially constructed meanings that guide this behavior. They are uniquely positioned in an uncertain environment that questions their status as real gang members without providing the means to establish legitimacy. They are uniquely invested in an identity that is ambiguous and open to attack from other environmental participants. The gang member, therefore, continuously faces real or imagined pressures to prove that his or her gang identity is authentic. Conversations tend to focus on building or reinforcing that identity, while gossip attacks or tears down a peer's claim to real gang membership. The meaning of "real gang member" guides how self-defined gang members talk about peers, how they talk about themselves, and, ultimately, how they respond to peers.

The notion of "real gang member" provides an idealized construct for self-defined gang members to pursue, and too often the meaning of "real" is intimately connected to violence. Despite high levels of uncertainty in the intergang environment, most self-defined gang members in Indianapolis considered violence a defining element of gang life. The DFW Boyz exemplify this: violence was a core element of their collective identity. In addition, they frequently tried to cultivate strong reputations by both talking about their violent capabilities and openly questioning peers' capacity for violence. Indeed, to the degree that gang members' understanding of "real" was associated with violence, they focused on violence during their conversations with peers. Although they used these conversations to build reputations for violence, the authenticity of these reputations remained tenuous. Just because a gang member could skillfully communicate his or her willingness and ability to use violence did not actually mean that he or she was violent. Many gang members acted tough, but they might not have been tough, and discerning those who were willing to use violence from those who were not was difficult for individuals invested in the intergang environment.