

Chapter Title: The Dilution Narrative: An Understanding That Some Gang Members Are Not “Real”

Book Title: Real Gangstas

Book Subtitle: Legitimacy, Reputation, and Violence in the Intergang Environment

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Published by: Rutgers University Press. (2012)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5hjfvv.7>

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CHAPTER 3

The Dilution Narrative

AN UNDERSTANDING THAT SOME GANG MEMBERS ARE NOT “REAL”

ALTHOUGH GANG MEMBERSHIP may be caused by an individual's response to his or her chaotic social, familial, or economic environment, it is not a particularly successful avenue for solving one's problems. Gangs may provide real friendship, and even a secondary family in which widespread loyalty mandates that members look out and care for other members. They can offer an escape for a distasteful home life, school experience, or peer environment. For some, gang life offers a short-term solution to abject poverty. Despite these benefits, gang membership has short- and long-term negative consequences. Most notably, individuals often join gangs for protection, only to become more at risk of criminal victimization (Decker and Van Winkle 1996; Melde, Taylor, and Esbensen 2009; Taylor 2007; Taylor, Feng et al. 2008; Taylor, Peterson et al. 2008). They are more likely to participate in serious criminal behavior, have repeated contact with the criminal justice system, and drop out of school (Thornberry et al. 2003). For many individuals, entrance into a gang marks a transition into a long-term pattern of chaos and disruption.

Gang membership, then, is a logical but dysfunctional adaptation to adverse life circumstances. Gangs provide a reprieve from some life circumstances, but they create new, more severe problems. This chapter focuses on one such problem. Self-defined gang members are confident about their status as “real” gang members, but they must negotiate a skeptical peer environment that routinely questions their claims of legitimacy.

A GANG'S INTERNAL CERTAINTY

A common byproduct of the interactions between members of the same street gang is a collective identity that defines the core values of the group.¹ The DFW Boyz, for example, are unified around the idea of being down for whatever, and they emphasize behavior that is consistent with this ethic. Members are informally encouraged to maintain the DFW Boyz reputation by intimidating, fighting, and opportunistically participating in a wide range of criminal activities. Gang members often reinforced this central identity during group conversations by providing vivid, even idealistic, self-characterizations that were consistent with the group's ideals. Moreover, they told stories about how the gang was, indeed, down for whatever. They also reinterpreted past events to emphasize the group's most valued characteristics, and they openly communicated those traits to peers.

In Indianapolis not all gang identities were alike.² Some groups, like the DFW Boyz, openly valued a willingness to engage in violence or other criminal activities. Other gang members claimed affiliation to larger gangs, like the Conservative Vice Lords or Black Gangster Disciples, and viewed themselves as belonging to a highly developed street organization that was entrepreneurially invested in the drug markets. Unlike the DFW Boyz, the most salient trait of these gangs was making money, and they stressed this pursuit over maintaining the group's reputation. Other individuals were more involved in hood gangs and therefore emphasized turf or neighborhood respect more than making money. Despite these differences, there was an important yet simple similarity between groups. They all had a fundamental understanding that their group was decidedly a gang.³

Being known as a gang member can be advantageous in the streets. The generic label of "gang" or "gang member" efficiently communicates a series of attributes that causes most people to engage the labeled group or individual cautiously. The gang label evokes ideas of violence and reciprocation in the face of conflict or disrespect. If, in the course of a potentially hostile interaction, an individual claims gang membership, the opposing party must consider the possible negative ramifications of angering a loyal and potentially violent street gang. Moreover, the label of "gang" or "gang member" is intimately attached to characteristics generally embraced in the streets. Gangs are considered to be tough, and

some are considered to be prosperous. Gang members often host parties or control gatherings at nightclubs, which can make gang membership socially desirable. If claims of membership are taken seriously, there is a degree of respect granted to the gang member that is difficult to match in the streets.

Interactions between members of the same gang produce an internal certainty about the status of the group and, by extension, the members themselves. In fact, it would be rather odd to hear self-defined gang members diminish the group's status or offer a self-description that stressed deficiencies. Instead, the messages articulated within the group ubiquitously reinforce not only its status as a gang but also its status as a group that plays a significant role in the streets. For example, routine conversations between members of the DFW Boyz often reflected hyperbolic efforts to position the group at the pinnacle of street life. Shawn once reinforced the status of the DFW Boyz by noting both the group's standing in the streets and its popularity among local youth: "We probably one of the most known cliques that everybody want to get with. Everybody trying to get down with us. We hear people all the time trying to get with us and clique up. We just tell them, 'Nah, we cool.'" A later conversation between Shawn, Layboy, and another member of the DFW Boyz demonstrated the level of confidence that gang members had in their status within the urban landscape:

LAYBOY: We got stronger, we known, we been known. We got the DFW Boyz, we been known.

SHAWN: We been known since day one when we went to school.

LAYBOY: We made the name that night, the next day everybody knew us.

G-DOG: We take over. We take over like that.

SHAWN: We take over.

LAYBOY: We take over, especially out East. The police had a stack on us that high [motioning with his hands]. Used to get chased by police everyday. They knew where we stay at.

"Being known" referred to the degree to which peers recognized the DFW Boyz as a viable gang worthy of respect. There was little doubt among the DFW Boyz that the gang and its individual members had become widely recognized in the streets of Indianapolis. They assumed

that outsiders should have also accepted the collective identity embraced by members of the group. The DFW Boyz was a gang, and the group was recognized as such in the streets.

EXAMINING THE DILUTION NARRATIVE

The certainty afforded by a relatively small number of close associates is not always reflective of the broader gang environment. More accurately, the intergang environment can exhibit widespread disagreement, skepticism, and uncertainty about which groups and which individuals should be considered legitimate gangs/gang members. Just because members of a particular collectivity identify their group as a gang, and themselves as gang members, does not mean that others in their social environment will share a similar evaluation. More likely, peers will question that evaluation or even dismiss the group as not being a real street gang. One's certainty about his or her membership is, therefore, matched by external doubt.

This doubt is produced by a general belief that the notion of gang has been diluted, so that nearly any willing individual can claim membership. Dilution occurs when a pure substance is combined with other elements that weaken the original composition. Relative to gangs, a common narrative suggests that as large numbers of urban youths have embraced gang life, they become increasingly detached from pure gang forms. The word "gang" is applied inaccurately so that it includes a range of collectivities that are clearly different from the pure, ideal, or intended conceptualization of "gang." Many groups claim to be a gang, but they are weakened imitations. Many individuals claim to be gang members, but they are perpetrating a fraud. For example, Sidney, a forty-five-year-old ex-convict, was often skeptical of gang members in Indianapolis:

Basically you have a lot of wannabes or drug dealers who just want to lay with their set. They're basically just drug dealers that have united and decided to give themselves a name. They are not real bangers. They ain't holdin' no turf. They ain't holdin' no fifteen city blocks. You know what I mean? Like you go to some cities where for a fifteen-, twenty-block or two-mile radius you better not get caught with your hat cocked to the right or left side or in a blue shirt or red shirt, or something like that. That's why I said there's a lot

perpetration in Indianapolis, because they don't know. If there was a gang in the Meadows [a low-income housing complex] there should only be one gang. Meadows is not that big. It don't cover that much territory to cover two or three different colors walkin' around up in there. That's why I say you got more misguided youth than anything that want to imitate a gang. And they don't understand it. . . . Over the years it became a fad. Like I say, you go in one corner and you got a group of guys claiming to be Vice Lords. And you go two blocks over and another group of individuals claim to Vice Lords and they don't know each other and don't know nothing about each other. That's where it has manifested to now.

Dilution is a story. It is a common interpretation of local gang life that allows street participants to better understand their world. The following discussion does not seek to evaluate the accuracy of that story but instead attempts to better understand the ideas of dilution that permeate street life. The narrative involves both an attempt to construct a boundary that differentiates real gangs from lesser groups and an explanation for how the pure gang form has become diluted.

The dilution narrative reflects a collective, though fragmented, attempt by those invested in street life and street gangs to ascribe meaning to the various collectivities that inhabit their surroundings. Surveying the social landscape of Indianapolis leads one to identify countless multifaceted and often overlapping groups. Some formal groups, like youth choirs, drum lines, or athletic teams, are clear in their purpose, appearance, and membership. Other groups are more ambiguous. In the communities along East Thirty-eighth Street, youths form informal groups, routinely hanging out or interacting with the same people on a day-to-day basis. Although most of these groups are simply nondescript networks of friends, many embrace a collective gang identity. The gang label is not taken lightly; those invested in the concept implicitly understand that a gang should be fundamentally different from other groups. Although there are many formal and informal social groups within the East Thirty-eighth Street area, only some can rightfully be classified as street gangs.

Proper classification can only occur through the establishment of a field boundary that separates gangs from alternative social groups. In the

streets of Indianapolis, the criteria used for establishing this boundary are widely varied. Many older gang members, who are loosely affiliated with Chicago-based street organizations or prison gangs, establish a field boundary according to formal standards. In doing so, they dismiss many youths as being fake gang members. Those self-defined gang members who are dismissed by the older generation remain certain of their gang status, but they also disseminate the dilution narrative by applying it to a broader understanding of the intergang environment. All self-defined gang members are actively involved in establishing the intergang field boundary, as they all perceive peers as being either real or fake.

Original Gangstas and Tales of Standards

Even though many self-defined gangs in Indianapolis could be objectively defined as loosely affiliated, disorganized groups, many older gang members, or Original Gangstas (OGs), relied on ideas of organizational sophistication to differentiate real from fake gangs. Groups could not just claim to be gangs. They had to meet certain standards to establish legitimacy. This belief was most likely the byproduct of both experience and a tendency to romanticize or reify the gangs of their youth. Many OGs grew up in a time when major Chicago street gangs such as the Vice Lords, Black Gangster Disciples, and El Rukns evolved into well-organized street organizations (Knox 2006; Knox and Papachristos 2002). Some claimed to have been in contact with these Chicago gangs during the 1970s, and they modeled Indianapolis gangs according to similar organizational ideals. Although I was never able to independently verify the existence of these gangs in Indianapolis, numerous trustworthy OGs claimed that some gangs remained organizationally sophisticated in the city. In addition, since many OGs spent a substantial amount of time in state and federal prison, they were exposed to a different level of gang participation. After leaving prison, they defined real gangs according to what they had experienced in prison. Street gangs were not as sophisticated as prison gangs, so they were not real gangs.

OGs often disagreed about how real gangs should be organized, but they did agree that real gangs should employ stringent standards for becoming and remaining a member. Some major gangs had lengthy manifestos that clearly articulated a formal leadership structure, rules, and doctrine (see Knox 2006; Knox and Papachristos 2002). Real members

were supposed to memorize large portions of this literature and recall it at will. Such displays were quite impressive, as relatively uneducated gang members could “spit,” or recite, their rather lengthy literature with relative ease. Original Gangstas generally noted that most of the younger gang members in Indianapolis were not following stringent standards of membership and could not be considered real gang members. One OG expressed to me how gangs operated back in the 1980s. By all accounts, Jon, who was quoted at length in the preceding chapter, was a high-ranking Vice Lord within the city. He was recently released from prison where he had been incarcerated for second-degree homicide for stabbing someone during a botched drug deal:

Back when I was coming up you had to prove yourself worthy to be a Lord or a Disciple. You couldn't just say, “Ah, I'm folks or I'm almighty.” You couldn't say that. First of all you had to be branded. You could say, “Ah, well I'm almighty.” I would say, “Alright show me, let me see your branding.” If you couldn't produce, that you would get whooped. I'm not just talking about getting beat up or black eye. No, you got whooped and sent to the hospital behind that. It was serious back then. We was trying to kill each other back then. We weren't no friends. Like right now you got the Vice Lords and the Disciples. Ain't no standing across the street. There was rules. This was their spot. This was our spot. Didn't no Disciple walk down the street in Lord neighborhood with his hat turned to the right. But on the other side you didn't go walking down no Disciple neighborhood with your hat cocked to the left. 'Cause you knew and you wore your hat straight. You move through there real swift like, try to get where you had to go.

Vice Lords is we got rules and by-laws. You got to learn the rules and by-laws. We got prayers. We got ways you got to carry yourself. Older Lords got to look out for younger Lords. They made us go to school. You don't go to school you getting violated, you getting jumped on. Just go, we ain't trippin' if you do good but just go to school. These things they don't do, know what I'm saying? You never leave a man down in the streets. If you got to stand there and die with them you got to stand there and dies with them . . . now, if you talk about active gang members? Nah, they're not following the principles.

The structure within his gang provided a degree of verifiability when an individual claimed gang membership. One could not simply claim to be a Lord or Disciple without a realistic threat of someone questioning that claim and using severe punishments for incidents of false claiming.

Despite these ideals, many OGs argued that individuals who claimed to be gang members did not know their literature, and many gangs had neglected standards for verifying membership. Thus the meaning of “gang” had become diluted. The process of becoming a gang member had become arbitrary, so that self-defined gang members were detached from the ideals of real gangs. Some OGs suggested that this trend had grown to the point where anyone could claim membership without fear of punishment. Knowledge, standards, and rules were no longer a part of many gang members’ lives. Noting this trend, Delron, an active drug dealer who had recently been released from prison where he had served time for two counts of second-degree murder, observed, “You just can’t walk around and say, “Ah, I’m Vice Lords or I’m GD,” or this and that. Ok, what makes you Vice Lord? Have you been through what you need to be a part of this gang? Do you know all the literature behind this gang? That’s just like me. I can go out ‘I’m Vice Lord, what’s up peeps,’ and ain’t nobody going to say nothing about it. See what I’m saying? I’m really not Vice Lord. That’s how they acting out here.” If gangs did not utilize or embrace standards for membership, and if they did not establish requirements for gang members, there were no limitations on who could claim membership. Many youths claimed membership but were not real members. They were perpetrating a fraud and were summarily dismissed by those with insight into the nature of real gangs.

Another OG, Trey, made this point quite clear, as he suggested that the pointless behavior common to many so-called gangs was an indication that they were not real:

TL: So you talk about a real gangster, what’s not real?

TREY: Doing stupid stuff.

TL: What’s stupid stuff?

TREY: Robberies, killing for no reason. Instead of taking out a whole organization you taking out a few. Killing kids is no, women no. They not gangstas.

TL: Do you see a lot of that stuff in Indianapolis today?

TREY: I'm seeing that stuff today like I never seen it in my life.

TL: The stupid stuff?

TREY: Stupid stuff. Real men fought. Might get your head busted. Might get stabbed, but now they blowing your face off. Running into your house like cowards. Disrespecting your momma's, your aunts. They ain't got nothing to do with life that you claim. See? You a man. Act like a man. Stand up. Put your dukes up and get knocked out like your daddy used to do it. That's real. Cowardly is this [gestures shooting a gun]. I never had to use one in my life, and when I did have it, it's because you have one. I ain't going to trip on it. Mess with blood, blood going to ride nationwide.

Real gangs had standards of conduct that members followed. Senseless acts were simply not tolerated. The presence of large numbers of gang members acting without consideration for these codes of conduct was, according to Trey, evidence of dilution. Consequently, these gang members were not real, as they represented a weakened and insufficient version of gang. They were perpetrating a fraud.

Dilution and Younger Gang Members

The older generation of gang members did not have a monopoly on establishing the boundaries of "real." Younger gang members, who were likely to be dismissed by the older generation, attached different meanings to the notion of "gang" and continued to propagate the dilution narrative. Their conceptualization of the intergang environment included more than just well-organized gangs, as they considered various hoods and loosely organized cliques as being worthy ganglike affiliations. Even with this broader understanding of their environment, younger gang members still believed that the notion of what a gang was had become diluted.

This realization first became apparent during a routine conversation with Shawn, Layboy, and two other younger gang members. The conversation began as I was hanging out with Shawn and Layboy in front of their aunt's apartment. Relative to other low-income complexes located on or near Thirty-eighth Street, this recently built apartment complex was well maintained and attractive. The external structure boasted a mix of brick and vinyl siding, and the roof was varied in height and slope,

giving the appearance of distinct though connected condominiums. A new playground sat across from the building. The surrounding parking lots were generally busy, as teenagers hung out in the open space and younger kids rode their bikes or played on the pavement, but the lot in front of this specific apartment building lacked activity. A few teenagers walked by as they were going to the nearby bus stop, and a few younger children rode their bikes around the circular drive in front of the building. Based on the scenery, an unsuspecting person would probably not have assumed that the complex had problems similar to more notorious complexes located only a short walk down the road. Yet only a few weeks before, someone had been murdered during the early evening hours in a store parking lot visible from where we stood. That summer, a few other shootings occurred in or in front of those apartments. Violence, it seemed, was always abstract and impersonal, yet close.

It was still early in the afternoon and tolerably warm, and we leaned on my car and talked about the streets. The boys told me that the apartments at the other end of the complex were rife with drug activity, but their end was relatively quiet. Indeed, marked police cars were often parked at the other end of the complex, and while I always expected my presence to raise suspicion, officers never seemed to notice me. Given that members of the DFW Boyz were scattered about the city and only sporadically involved in drug dealing, the police could not have targeted one location for such activities. Moreover, Shawn and Layboy did not sell drugs, and the police would not have known about this location. Their aunt's apartment was merely one place among many for gang members to congregate, and while they were often left unsupervised, they typically reserved street activities for other locations. Instead, this location served as a comfortable and relatively quiet place to hang out.

Cars occasionally rolled by, which caused us to abandon our conversation to glance at passersby. Passengers in the cars would do the same, at times giving us a quick nod as they drove by. Shawn and Layboy seemed comfortable in this setting, never pensive about passing cars. Each time a car passed by, I could not help but wonder what people were thinking when they noticed a rather conspicuous six-foot-four-inch young white man casually talking to local teenagers. This thought was heightened on days like this when I held a tape recorder. Over time, I learned that most

youths and adults accepted my role in their environment, tape recorder included, if Layboy and Shawn said I was cool. They boys turned out to be invaluable resources for establishing credibility.

As we talked, two teenage boys approached. I recognized them from the time I had spent in a local youth center, but I had not seen them for months. After a quick introduction that included the formality of having them sign consent forms, we began an informal discussion. Joe, the older of the two, looked down at the tape recorder and said, telling me his hood affiliation, "My name is Joe. I'm from the Balt."

Taking his usual role in such conversations, Shawn assured him that talking to me was safe by saying, "Tell him about the Balt."

Joe replied questioningly, "Tell him what we're doing in the hood? Everything, what regular gang bangers do?"

"What's going on in the Balt?" replied Shawn, almost taking over as the researcher.

I added, "Yeah, I went through there two or three years ago with some church people, and there were five or six guys your age following us around that didn't want us to be there. So what's going on in those apartments?"

Joe replied, "See, in the Balt there's stuff going on out there. I ain't trying to be racist or nothing, but a white boy like you walking into the Balt like that, they going to think something's up with you. We ain't used to having white people coming around. So you come in there and walk around and you look suspicious."

His younger brother Jordan chimed in, "They going to jump you, no doubt."

"They going to jump you." Joe continued, "I don't know if you going to make it out."

"I did, fortunately."

"That's good," said Joe. This caused Shawn to laugh at the notion that Joe needed to validate the fact that I had not been beaten as being a good thing. He repeated what Joe said to relive the humor.

I had been through the Baltimore apartments a few years before with a small church group that was attempting to reduce crime in Indianapolis. They were modeling some of the approaches made famous by Boston's TenPoint Coalition (see Kennedy, Braga, and Piehl 2001). Many of the churches in Indianapolis's high-crime areas had organized

to help community residents. In addition to providing programs that helped struggling residents and placing political pressure on local politicians, they formed multiple small groups every Friday night and walked the streets in high-crime areas. The night we went into the Baltimore apartments was one of the few times that I was concerned for my safety. One of the church members tried to approach a group of teenage boys, who, without talking, all turned their backs to us and dispersed. The boys followed us through the apartment complex. As the light began to fade, I became increasingly uncomfortable, but no one else in my group seemed to notice. We eventually left without incident, but I gained the impression that even though these church members were local residents, they were somewhat naive. Over time, I learned that the apartment complex, indeed, had a bad reputation, as it was a haven for drugs and gangs.

Joe's reaction was, however, a bit overstated. As a general rule, I operated under the assumption that the probability of violent victimization was low, even in the most high crime communities. I would often say to others, my wife included, that driving to the research site was more dangerous than actually being in the research site. Most people who lived in the Balt were probably law abiding, and those involved in criminal activity would not have benefited from my victimization. Gang members, especially those selling drugs in low-income apartment complexes, were aware of the consequences that followed when outsiders were injured or threatened. Unwanted attention often followed a high-profile incident, and gang members generally exercised restraint unless they were directly threatened. Years before this research began, a major gang in this area was dismantled by criminal justice agencies after a young girl was murdered during a shooting (McGarrell and Chermak 2003). People still occasionally talked about the event, and such attention was avoided if possible.

Up to this point in the research process, I had heard many OGs employ the dilution narrative to dismiss their younger counterparts. Such claims, I thought, were indicative of a generational rejection of newer trends coupled with nostalgic and skewed recollections of times past. As such, I easily overlooked or ignored these accounts, and I did not think that such ideas heavily influenced younger and more active gang members. As we continued to talk, the boys began to reveal how

they also embraced similar ideas. The dilution narrative largely shaped their negotiation of the intergang environment, as they seemed concerned with distinguishing real gang members from individuals who merely imitated gang members. When compared with their older counterparts, however, the boys clung to vague notions of standards but embraced a more fluid conception of their environment.

False Flagging and Fake Gang Members

Making distinctions between real and fake gangs could be a confusing endeavor. In an attempt to establish a field boundary, younger gang members did not just rely on the formal standards used by their predecessors. In fact, the reality of the Indianapolis streets was that most self-defined gangs did not abide by stringent, formal standards. So, if such standards did indeed distinguish real gang members from fake gang members, the OGs use of the dilution narrative would have been accurate. Regardless of how they were perceived by the older generation, youthful gang members remained convinced that they were real gang members, while some of their peers were not. As a result, they were involved in a continuous process of defining their environment, but they did so without the convenience of explicit standards.

Jordan continued to talk about life in the streets by identifying his gang affiliation, "Everybody in the hood Vice Lords but we ain't no Vice Lords. We G's, I'm a G."

"So everybody in Baltimore is Vice Lords and you're G's?" I asked for further clarification.

He replied, "Some of them Vice Lords out there."

Still trying to understand the relationship between the Gangster Disciples and Vice Lords, I asked, "Is that a problem for you out there?"

"No," Jordan responded, "We ain't got no problems out there. We hood, we all together."

Thirtieth Street is a well-known clique, or hood gang, located in and around the Baltimore apartments, so I asked, "Are you guys in a clique?"

"We ain't got no clique, we just a hood," Jordan responded. "Been there since we was little. So we just the hood."

Joe added, "I had a chance to be with folks [GD's alliance], but I chose not to, though. Go through all that, the training get my ranks,

I was going to do that, but I decided not to do it.” He was now referring to the more formal aspects of the Gangster Disciples. Again, more formal gangs did seem to exist in Indianapolis, but they were not as dominant as the more loosely affiliated cliques that beset communities.

“Why GDs and not Vice Lords?”

Joe tried somewhat unsuccessfully to clarify, “Nah, nah, you see everybody can’t be GDs or Vice Lords. . . . I know mostly Vice Lords. But I know a lot of GDs folk. I know a lot about gang banging, but it’s just that I don’t use it against nobody ’cause I don’t feel like anybody need it.”

“We ain’t got no problems,” agreed Jordan.

Joe quickly added, “But if somebody come up trying to say something about the gang that’s just false, I can handle it for real because you’re false claiming.”

Although Jordan claimed affiliation with the Gangster Disciples, his connection to the hood was more integral to his sense of belonging. Some street-oriented individuals who lived in the Baltimore apartments were unified more by place of residence than by gang affiliation. Yet the fluidity of these affiliations could be confusing. Youths who lived in the Baltimore apartments grew up around gangs. They knew gang members and were familiar with gang symbols and rituals. This familiarity may have caused some youths to inconsistently claim affiliation. It seemed to provide Joe with an option to claim gang membership if needed, but he did not see himself as an integral part of the GDs, only the hood. This option was not uncommon. Gang affiliation by convenience was a possibility for some individuals but unacceptable for others, and few gang members acknowledged the contradiction.

Gang members considered the issue of false claiming to be a significant problem. At times, youths falsely claimed membership to build up their reputations, fit in, or convince others not to mess with them. Other youths genuinely believed that they were affiliated, but they really did not understand gang life or the streets. As a cultural entity, the street gang had become so familiar that many youths could superficially appear to be gang members. Their understanding of the boundary between real and fake was constantly being challenged.

The belief that large numbers of youths falsely embraced gang life was central to the dilution narrative. Shawn, Layboy, and other associates

often focused on these so-called fake gang members or “false flaggers.” Although Gangster Disciples and Vice Lords dominated this conversation, the distinction between real and fake was not just directed toward people claiming affiliation with those specific groups. Unlike the OGs, younger gang members embraced a conception of “gang” that was more inclusive, but they maintained that their peers were also prone to falsely claim affiliation with the various cliques or hoods throughout the city. Layboy and Shawn, for example, occasionally encountered an unfamiliar person who claimed membership in the DFW Boyz. This often occurred because another DFW Boy invited that person to join the gang without first getting the approval of Shawn and Layboy. Sometimes the individual was just using the name of the group to build up his or her reputation. In either situation, the boys expressed a concern that the group was expanding too quickly and was losing its potency. Too many weak or soft individuals had begun to claim membership in the DFW Boyz. That was a problem.

Similar issues occurred with hood affiliations. For example, many youths with limited access to the Baltimore apartments claimed that hood. Jordan and Joe occasionally expressed frustration with boys who lived in other areas but came to the apartments to visit friends or family. Spending a few nights in the apartments did not make someone a part of the hood, and yet many visitors left and claimed the Balt. Youths in the streets also evaluated the various Indianapolis hoods. Only specific communities were considered to be legitimate gang hoods. If someone had grown up or resided in those areas, his or her ability to handle the streets was not immediately questioned. Youths from other parts of the city, however, were immediately perceived as being weak, or soft. Claiming Thirtieth Street, Tenth Street, or Forty-second Street might have initially given someone street credibility. However, claiming Eighty-sixth Street did not give someone credibility, as communities that far north were generally middle class, and residents were labeled soft.

Referencing this, Jordan explained, “There’s a lot of people that come into the hood thinking they’re hard from different hoods. Yeah, they think they hard.”

“If you claiming Gangster Disciples, but you can’t spit your lick, then what’s with you? ⁴ See what I’m saying?” Said Joe, redirecting the conversation to the GDs and Vice Lords.

A lick is a formal element used by larger gangs like the Gangster Disciples and the Vice Lords to validate membership. The older original gangstas identified the importance of such information but said that there were rules about when such signifiers could be used. For example, signifiers should only be used within the gang, and an outsider could not request that a member reveal his or her lick, or gang-specific signifier. As such, a lick would not be a useful tool for someone who was not affiliated with that specific gang. Aware of these issues, I asked, "How do you know if somebody is false claiming?"

Jordan responded predictably by saying, "Me personally, there's plenty of ways. Like, take for example, another GD, two GDs. All right, you claiming GD right? And you say, 'Spit your lick,' and you saying something that's in the Bible . . ."

With this comment the group erupted with laughter. Although the idea that someone would respond with a lick that came from the Bible was indeed ridiculous, it was not uncommon for the boys to encounter people who claimed membership in the GDs or VLs but who did not understand the concept of a lick.

Joe continued, "Sir, you don't know what you're doing. You not really in this clique, sorry to say. You not with the gang banging. Now a GD can't ask a Vice Lord 'spit your lick.' They're not supposed to. We not supposed to ask a Vice Lord, 'Spit your lick.' If you do, you're violated [punished], you're violated bro.' That's violated right there."

The boy's discussion of false flagging represented a common belief among gang youth. Many local youths claimed to be gang members, but few actually were. Instead, they embraced gang life and superficially represented gangs without having any connection to real gangs, or having an understanding of what gang life was all about. Unlike their older counterparts, youths considered hoods and cliques to be under the auspices of gang life, so they assumed that the same principles applied to these less sophisticated gang forms.

Improper Channels of Membership

As we continued to talk, I began to wonder where one's understanding of gang membership came from. Although it was possible that some youths embraced an identity that was not reinforced by others, I thought it quite improbable. More likely, individuals came to embrace

their gang status through repeated interactions with a group that claimed to be a gang. The dilution narrative assumed not only that large numbers of youths falsely represented gang membership, but also that they learned to do so through improper channels. Again, this notion was contingent on an assumption that there were a limited number of ways to form or join a gang, and those employing the narrative had unique insight into such processes.

A few months earlier, I had spoken to Naaz, an older and inactive Gangster Disciple, who was originally from Chicago but had moved to Indianapolis after spending ten years in prison. He was adamant that most Indianapolis youths who claimed to be Gangster Disciples or Vice Lords were not really affiliated with those groups. Such claims were instead based on a series of relationships that convinced impressionable youths that they were gang members and that their groups were gangs. Naaz emphasized that the processes that led individuals to falsely represent gang membership were wide-ranging, and he used a hypothetical scenario to describe how spontaneously formed relationships in correctional facilities commonly led to such errors:

You know my cousin was Folk, so now when I go over there I am Folk. Three years later, never actively involved or never did anything, don't know anything about it, I go into Marion county jail. It rough as fuck, and now I am Folks. There might be two or three guys from my cousin's neighborhood that knew me three years ago and:

“Ah, what's up Jeff?”

“Ah what's up, what's happening GD? All right.”

And now it just goes on, and it's like as you meet more and more individuals,

“Ah this is so and so he's folks from so and so.”

You go on to a penal institution, and I always used to say: you know in the Army they say, “Be all that you can be,” in prison it's, “Be whoever you want to be.” 'Cause everyone has a story to tell, and nobody knows if you are telling the truth or not.

Past associations gave someone enough exposure to street gangs so that he or she could look or act like a gang member in certain contexts. This was made easier by an intergang environment that undervalued, as many

OGs suggested, the use of stringent standards for membership. In effect, a person could claim membership to the GDs or VLs because everyone else who claimed membership lacked the knowledge about gang codes, manifestos, and rituals that would be required to challenge a membership claim. When a person claimed gang affiliation, and peers unquestioningly accepted his or her membership, the temporary identity, which was embraced to negotiate a difficult environment, became more permanent. To Naaz, these individuals were not real gang members.

As my conversation with Layboy, Shawn, Joe, and Jordan continued, the boys also displayed a belief that large numbers of youths were using inappropriate means to gain access to gangs. Instead of focusing on social relationships, however, the boys discussed how the Internet allowed youths to access information about gangs. Given their access to supposedly secret gang knowledge, many youths boldly represented those gangs.

Layboy, still amused by the Bible verse comment made earlier, laughed again and said, "Spit your Bible verse."

"Where did you learn your lick?" I asked.

Jordan replied, "Where did I learn my lick from? I learned it from a lot of places. You can get it from the Internet."

"Yeah," added Layboy, "you can get it from the Internet."

Shawn ended his unusually long period silence by clarifying, "Call them Internet gangstas," as if there was a distinction between an Internet gangsta and a real gangsta.

"Yeah, call them Internet gangstas," agreed Layboy.

"You can see the heart," continued Jordan. "You can see all that stuff [showing me gang signs], you can see them all. It's all on there."

"They show you all the gang signs," agreed Layboy.

Although they superficially displayed gang membership through gang symbols, speech patterns, or body language, and may have demonstrated knowledge about some of the formal aspects of gang life, so-called Internet gangsters were not real. They gained insight into the formal rules of larger, more established gangs through online resources. Anyone, after all, could easily access information about well-known gangs through Internet searches that quickly locate formerly privileged information regarding codes, rules, literature, and manifestos of major gangs like the Black Gangster Disciples or Conservative Vice Lords (see Knox 2006; Knox and Papachristos 2002). Networking sites like

MySpace also provided youths with virtual access to so-called gang members who freely exhibited gang secrets. Such access gave some youths enough knowledge to appear like gang members, but, according to the boys, they were only perpetrating a fraud.

The individuals involved with this study, both young and old, strongly believed that large numbers of youths were using improper avenues to become affiliated with gangs. Although the older generation of gang members spoke of strict standards to distinguish real from fake, the younger generation used a broader understanding of the intergang environment that was not bound by explicit standards. Notions of real, fake, and false pathways to membership related not only to affiliations like the Gangster Disciples and Vice Lords but also to cliques and hoods scattered throughout the city. Incidents of perceived false representation of cliques and hoods were a problem. There was also a general understanding among gang youths that entire groups falsely claimed gang or clique affiliation. Given the popularity of gang life in some East Thirty-eighth Street neighborhoods, youths routinely formed groups, created a name, and adopted ganglike symbols. Through social contacts or Internet access, they might have modeled well-known gangs like the Gangster Disciples and Vice Lords, or they might have formed an independent clique. To individuals in the street, just because a group thought it was a gang and modeled the appearance of a gang did not mean it actually was a gang. Shawn and Layboy even admitted that as children they formed a group named after a cartoon series. They laughed at their younger selves and their earlier assumptions that such a group was a real gang. In retrospect, it was not a real gang, and it did not last long. They were just children trying to imitate the real gangs they saw in the streets. Many youths in the streets formed similar groups that tried to act like a gang, but according to Shawn, Layboy, and other gang members, they were perpetrating a fraud.

Interpreting "Real"

Another central assumption made by individuals who embraced the dilution narrative was that they were able to accurately discern who was and who was not a real gang member. Issues of false flagging typically arose and became problematic when one's understanding of real gang membership was inconsistent with peer's understand of real gang

membership. Some youths might have intentionally misrepresented themselves for personal gain, but more often those individuals accused of false representation genuinely believed that they were part of a gang. The boy or girl that represented a given hood, clique, or gang was not knowingly violating a peer's expectations for gang membership. Only through interactions with peers would he or she even become aware of this evaluation.

Intergang interactions involved an interpretive process whereby invested parties assessed their counterpart's right to belong. Whereas previous encounters or group reputations informed most intergang interactions, gang members did encounter unfamiliar individuals or groups. Both parties often clarified gang affiliation during these encounters (for a more nuanced discussion of these encounters see Garot 2010). The manner by which individuals clarified their gang affiliation was not guided by formal process in which both parties followed a patterned and rehearsed introduction. Rather, it evolved informally, as parties used different gang signifiers to announce their affiliation. Nearly all gangs, hoods, or cliques in Indianapolis embraced these signifiers, and members relied on codes, gestures, speech patterns, and colors to communicate gang membership. Being accepted as a real gang member during an initial encounter should ideally be contingent on these signifiers.

Throughout my research, gang members confidently broadcasted their abilities to discern real gang members from fake gang members. At times, their judgments were grounded in an innate ability to sense emotions in another person. For example, some gang members confidently proclaimed that they could tell if someone was fake moments after meeting that person. Such clarity was not produced by the use of secret gang rituals but by an innate ability to sense fear in that person. It was good that they were not able to perceive skepticism emanating from me. More often, gang members mentioned that they relied heavily on various gang signifiers to discern real from fake. Such clarity was, however, unconvincing.

As our conversation continued, I asked Shawn, Layboy, Joe, and Jordan, "How do you tell an Internet gangster from a real one?"

"The way they're dressed," replied Jordan. "They'll have on all red or all blue. If you're criping [representing the Crips] it you'll have on all blue. If you a Blood you going to have on all that red." It was an odd

response, given that colors were probably the best-known gang symbol and were perhaps the easiest to fabricate.

"You can tell," Layboy added with an air of certainty. "You can tell when somebody lying, man."

"It's easy to tell if somebody's lying," agreed Joe.

Layboy explained, "Like, for instance, everybody used to say 'on the G' even if they Vice Lord, 'cause everybody used to say 'on the G.' They really didn't know."

"Gangster Disciple," clarified Shawn. "On the G" was supposed to be a phrase used by Gangster Disciples, but it became popular with many youths who claimed affiliations to other gangs.

Admitting that he, too, used this terminology without an understanding of the real meaning, Layboy said, "'Cause I used to say when I was really little, 'On the G, on the G,' but I didn't really know what it mean. I didn't really know what it mean. 'Til I got older. People used to ask me, 'Why do you say 'on the G?'"

"But mostly 'on the G' was a word, it was a word," added Joe, implying that the phrase had lost its meaning. "But if you say 'on the six' or something like that."

Layboy included, "That's how you know most people, they really don't say anybody 'on the six' or 'on the five.'"

"They don't say 'on the five' or 'on the six,'" agreed Jordan.

Both responses were somewhat surprising, as the boys implied that Internet gangsters would not know about these phrases. I had heard otherwise. One Gangster Disciple from Chicago told me that Indianapolis youths often recited patterns of numbers that were meaningful to the GDs, but they really did not know what the numbers meant. "On the six" was a much simpler phrase that could easily be transmitted through networks of youths who did not understand its meaning. It signified the Gangster Disciples, who represented themselves with a six-pointed star. By contrast, five-pointed star represented the Vice Lords, and so the phrase "on the five" signified Vice Lord affiliation. A simple Internet search of "on the five, on the six" leads to such insights. It also reveals inflammatory phrases like "six poppin' and five droppin'," which implies that the GDs are shooting, and the VLs are being killed. These messages are often posted on MySpace pages and are not difficult to access.

Joe acknowledged this to be true, “‘On the five’ because I ain’t going to lie, back in the day I ain’t know what they mean when they say ‘on the five.’ I thought five was a line number [bus line], I didn’t know what it meant, I didn’t know none of it.”

“On the seven, on the seven,” chimed Jordan randomly.

Shawn clarified, “That’s Brightwood Boyz.” Brightwood was a hood just south of Thirtieth Street along Keystone Avenue. Cliques also seemed to adopt their own vernacular.

Layboy asked, “On the seven?”

This too was an odd response. Layboy was heavily invested in the various Indianapolis cliques, especially those on the northeast side of the city, and I was surprised that he was not familiar with this phrase. Perhaps the number of subtle symbols and linguistic devices used by a large number of different hoods, cliques, and gangs was just too complicated for the average gang member to keep up with. Ironically, youths lacking full insight into the range of gang signifiers also used their limited knowledge to dismiss and disparage others.

This last insight further verified what I was beginning to suspect. For those embracing the dilution narrative, there was a true and clear distinction between real and fake gang members. The boys ardently believed that there was a discernable boundary to an intergang field, and through interactions they could distinguish real and fake gang members. Some self-defined gang members belonged to the intergang field, but many did not. Yet with this last question, Layboy revealed a deficiency in his knowledge about a particular group. During the course of an interaction, would Layboy have summarily dismissed someone who was saying “on the seven” simply because he was unfamiliar with the phrase? My skepticism about the boys’ ability to discern real from fake contrasted with their confidence. The subtleties involved in this interaction process were too complicated, I thought, and the standards for evaluation were too ambiguous for such certainty. The self-defined gang members who were dismissed by the DFW Boyz would have genuinely believed that they were part of the general gang environment, and they might have employed a different understanding of gang to dismiss their detractors. Were there groups or individuals in Indianapolis that would have labeled Layboy, Shawn, and DFW Boyz as being a fake gang?

I wanted to examine the consequences of these assessments, so I asked, “So what do you do with the fake guys, the guys you think are fake?” My skepticism had unintentionally surfaced in the end of the question.

“You can tell if they’re fake or not,” clarified Layboy in response to the last part of my question. Apparently, there was no ambiguity in this process.

Shawn responded, “Get them up out of here.”

“Most people say ‘on the five, on the five,’” included Layboy. “Try asking them a question, they don’t know nothing. ‘Spit your lick.’ ‘What?’”

“If you respond with ‘what,’ time for you get up out of here. Get them up out of here,” agreed Shawn, as he implied that the person would be threatened and/or forced to leave if he or she did not respond appropriately.

“Is the lick your literature, or is it numbers?” Given that Layboy provided a secondary question used for validating membership, I wanted to verify the substance of a “lick.” During earlier interviews with gang members not affiliated with the DFW Boyz,⁹ I had been exposed to both styles of verification.

“Yeah, literature,” responded Joe.

Jordan disagreed, “Numbers, numbers.”

I noted the inconsistency; it could have been caused by confusion or an understanding that the numbers used for the lick originated in gang literature. It also could have reflected the different methods used by the GDs and VLs. Based on my earlier interactions with gang members, the Vice Lords recited literature at length, while the GDs used numbers.

Layboy further elaborated, “Some people just make up stuff. Like the dudes I used to hang around with, the high-ranking Vice Lords I used to hang around, they say ‘on the five,’ and spit their lick, ‘on the five, something, something, something, something, something.’ If you just copy them after hearing them say it—some people just copy it right off the street. Some people write it on paper, write their lick on paper.”

Joe added, “They be drawing gang signs and everything. Five-point crown and all of that. They got a lot of stuff. There’s this dude in my school wearing a five-point crown. But see what it is, dude in my school because he was about to get saying Insane [Vice Lords] lick and he was Almighty. He had the Insane lick on his body but he was Almighty,

though. So Insane was going to jump him though, there's only three Insanes in my school. There's supposed to be three Almighty. The rest is just fake."

To the boys, this last example provided clear evidence that the notion of "gang" had become diluted. While interacting with individuals at school, they learned that many peers claimed affiliation to the Gangster Disciples or Vice Lords, but only a few could actually validate their claims. It was an idea embraced by nearly everyone in this study, regardless of their age or experience. Some gang members were real and some were not. All self-defined gang members, it seemed, believed in and established a boundary that clearly distinguished the two groups.

CONCLUSION

The confidence expressed by gang members related to both their self-assessments and their evaluations of other groups. Gang members were supremely confident in their gang's status, not only as a real gang but also as an elite gang. Moreover, members commonly embraced the dilution narrative and fervently alleged that many youths falsely claimed gang affiliation. Gang members confidently labeled other groups or individuals as being fraudulent without considering that they might have erred in their evaluations. Such confidence was, however, overshadowed by the harsh reality that the greater intergang environment did not match their internal certainty. Self-defined gang members who were willing to label other gangs as fraudulent were equally likely to be labeled as imitators of real gangs. The intergang environment was filled with contradicting evaluations and generalized uncertainty.

A central problem for gang members, therefore, involves the continuous need to reconcile their self-assessments with the dismissive appraisals of peers. One wonders if the street participant who is not affiliated with gang life experiences a similar sort of pressure. Does the active armed robber, the drug dealer, the pimp, the hustler, or the prostitute experience a clear disconnect between parts of his or her identity and the evaluations of relevant peers? These street roles are grounded in specific activities, so the boundary between real and fake is clear. If one robs, he or she is, by definition, a robber. Perhaps there is a difference between a person who defines him- or herself as an armed robber and a person who only sporadically commits an act of robbery. But such distinctions are

not problematic for street participants. The gang member identity is, however, easily embraced and frequently questioned on the streets.

Scholars have identified a few other categories or identities that can create a similar pressure, but they are not mutually exclusive with gang life. For example, gang members and non-gang members alike “do gender,” as they pursue ideal masculine and feminine roles in the streets (Anderson 1999; Campbell 1984 and 1987; Copes and Hochstetler 2003; Miller 1998; Miller and Brunson 2000; Miller and Decker 2001; Oliver 1994; Wilkinson 2001). Whereas females can use gender stereotypes to minimize or alter their participation in violent events (Miller 1998; Miller and Brunson 2000; Miller and Decker, 2001), males often strive to emulate the masculine ideals of toughness and physical, sexual, or mental prowess (Anderson 1999; Copes and Hochstetler 2003; Oliver 1994; Wilkinson 2001). Street-oriented males experience pressure to demonstrate to others that they are, in fact, real men. To some extent, the construction of masculinity is similar to the construction of gang identities. Just as a self-defined gang member can be labeled as a “wannabe,” a male can be labeled as a “pussy” or a “bitch.” In both cases the victim of the negative label has been cast outside of a socially constructed boundary. Yet male gang members are subjected to a unique need to demonstrate that they are both real men and real gang members. Although many street participants experience pressures that accompany the former identity, self-defined gang members uniquely experience the pressures attached to the latter identity.

This aspect of gang life reveals an important distinction between gang members and non-gang members, and it may partially explain why gang members are more heavily involved in criminal behavior. A gang member’s need to reconcile any disagreement between his or her gang’s collective identity and conflicting peer assessments forces the gang member to demonstrate authenticity according to his or her understanding of “real.” At best, this need forces gang members to validate their identity by employing harmless signifiers of gang status (symbols or codes), but this method is often ineffective. At worst, this need causes gang members to behave in a manner that is consistent with their gang’s collective identity. For example, the DFW Boyz define themselves as being down for whatever, and so they respond to a skeptical environment accordingly. Unfortunately, violence is a core element of that identity.