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## CHAPTER 4

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### *The Paradox of Legitimacy*

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GIVEN THAT GANG MEMBERS are immersed in a social environment that is characterized by pervasive skepticism, their social routines are influenced by the mere possibility that a peer or peer group is observing and assessing their actions. Such concerns are heightened by the uncertainty that accompanies that skepticism. The dilution narrative is a commonly embraced story, but it is not accompanied by stable, predictable, and clear indices that allow for objective distinctions between real and fake gang members. One may be tempted to accept unquestioningly a single version of “real” offered by an OG or the members of a particular gang, but the impartiality guiding such perceived truth is questionable. A gang member’s understanding of what a real gang is is largely self-serving and based on personal experience. The intergang environment, therefore, consists of innumerable self-serving definitions of “real,” and disagreements abound. For example, not all other self-defined gang members in Indianapolis shared the dismissive sentiments of the DFW Boyz. Rejected peers were unlikely to agree with negative appraisals of the gang, and they may have even viewed the DFW Boyz as a collection of fraudulent gang members.

Gang members are caught in a troubling paradox. They face constant pressure to validate their claims to gang membership in the presence of skepticism and derision, and they are, therefore, centrally concerned with gaining and maintaining legitimacy in the intergang environment. Individuals who officially join a gang are thrust into an uncertain environment in which they repeatedly have to demonstrate to others that they are a genuine part of this new social environment. This is not so much about proving themselves within the group but rather about establishing legitimacy to outsiders, especially those who also claim gang

affiliation. It is somewhat ironic, then, that individuals join gangs in response to troubling circumstances, only to be confronted with an enduring struggle for legitimacy. What is paradoxical about legitimacy in the intergang environment, however, is not only the presence of this struggle, but also the reality that the intergang environment lacks clear, agreed-upon standards for establishing and maintaining legitimacy. Gang members are immersed in a social environment that is heavily invested in assessments of real and not real, yet they are unable to demonstrate objectively to peers that they belong to the intergang field.

#### SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED FIELD BOUNDARIES

In the streets, the notion of a “real gang member” is a social construct created during routine social interactions between self-defined gang members who are struggling to establish the boundaries of the intergang field. The process of establishing a clear distinction between real and fake gang members is similar to what some scholars have termed “boundary work,” which involves the collective and continuous efforts of relevant actors to distinguish that which belongs from that which does not in a given social forum (see Gieryn 1983). The notions of “real gang” or “real gang member,” therefore, signify a symbolic boundary that conceptually distinguishes high-status groups or people from low-status groups or people (see Lamont and Molnar 2002). In the context of a gang member’s day-to-day social setting, an array of labels can be used to either validate or marginalize another group or person. And, as noted in chapter 3, gang members are quite willing to marginalize their peers.

The construction of field boundaries is not unique to gang life; many collections of people struggle to define the parameters of their social arena. For example, scientists constantly work to establish the scope of their influence in response to competing unscientific perspectives. They must convince outsiders and policy makers that science has a monopoly on real knowledge for certain issues (Gieryn 1983 and 1999; Shackley and Wynne 1996). This struggle has been evident in the debate on climate change, as scientists collectively work to convince the public that the answers to the climate issue are found exclusively within the boundaries of science (Shackley and Wynne 1996; Zehr 2000). In the effort to expand their influence, or to resist external control efforts,

organizations also work to establish field boundaries. During the 1980s, credit unions, for example, collectively formed a national federation that helped combat interference from the banking industry by defining the parameters of credit unions (Lune and Martinez 1999). The collective struggle to develop and use the notion of a boundary is common in many different social arenas.

Gang members, however, are not collectively etching out their place of influence in society; nor are they striving for political or economic viability. They are, instead, struggling to find meaning and gain dominance within an uncertain social environment. Instead of collectively struggling to define real in response to an external threat, gang members are focused on casting judgment on peers in the intergang environment. This process is complicated by both a lack of uniformity in that environment and the inability to establish a set of criteria that serve as boundary objects, or stable and reproducible ideas that create consensus between divergent social actors (see Shackley and Wynne 1996; Star and Griesemer 1989). Even within a limited area like Indianapolis, subtle variations between gangs create disagreements, and few standards exist to reconcile differing opinions.

Street gangs provide some natural impediments for establishing relatively stable criteria that properly distinguish groups that belong from groups that do not. For example, they vary by size, structure, and degree of organizational sophistication (Decker, Bynum, and Weisel 1998; Klein and Maxson 2006). Most gangs have no clear function, and they cannot be accurately described as having a rational output. Some gangs are entrepreneurially involved in drug sales, but most are not (Klein 1995; Klein and Maxson 2006). Although gang members embrace street culture, that cultural system also includes many individuals who do not claim gang membership. The impediments to establishing a clear boundary are so great that researchers have historically struggled over the definition of "gang." Only through rigorous debate and numerous public disagreements have researchers narrowed their understanding of the definition (see Ball and Curry 1995; Bjerregaard 2002; Esbensen et al. 2001; Klein 1995 and 2005; Winfree et al. 1992). Self-defined gang members who are personally invested in the establishment of a field boundary are not, however, actively engaged in a wide-ranging open debate about the placement of that boundary.

Gang members do undoubtedly embrace an array of cultural cues that are intended to communicate gang status. Although an outsider may mistakenly view these cues as objective signifiers of real gang membership, many street participants view the use of stereotypical gang symbols like colors, licks, tattoos, signs, or speech patterns as dubious attempts to act like a gang member. Indeed, a closer examination of these cues reveals that they have limited capacity to transcend the dilution narrative and serve as clarifiers in the streets. Too often they are vague or inconsistent; nearly all superficial signifiers of gang membership are easily falsifiable and are often viewed skeptically by others in the gang environment.

When asked to clarify how they distinguish between real and fake gang members, individuals not connected to the DFW Boyz, and therefore detached from my conversations with Layboy, Shawn, and their associates, also relied heavily on superficial and symbolic displays of gang membership. They commonly used colors, licks, tattoos, speech, or vague behavioral patterns as indicators of gang status. Yet their confidence was accompanied by admissions of doubt, as they admitted that many youths use these cultural cues to falsely represent gang membership:

TL: How do you know if somebody is a gang member?

KENNY: Down here—rags. Vice Lord—red. To be honest, I'm a folk. GD's folks to the fullest, know what I mean? My rag would be blue. Other gangs, getting tattoos, you see a tat. They show you a tat. They got their gang on there. I mean, that's where they're from. Gang signs, niggas throw up their hood and all of that. That's how you really know. How the way they talk. How the way they approach you. Like gangsters come up to you, "What's up, folk." That's how you really know. Niggas be trying to act though, hard. Like niggas try to act. You got to give them a test. You feel me? Like this nigga, you know what I'm saying, you got to give them a test. Niggas trying to be too much, trying to be what they can't be. I just tell them they be pushing it to the limit, a little too far, man.

TL: So you have GDs over here and GDs over there. How do you know that one group is not just twenty kids wearing the right colors?

KENNY: 'Cause you got a lick. "What's your lick? What's your number?" My lick's 74741234 [the last four numbers are fake substitutes].

If you don't know your lick you not a gangster. I mean that's in the G code. Hoover wrote that. The Vice Lords too. We don't know nothing about they lick. All the Gs got different licks. Like different colors of blue, but everybody's still folks. It comes from your general, it comes from your leader, it comes from the person that jumped you in folks. It all depends on where you come from. You got area codes too. I'm from downtown 12 now. My hood number went in there too with me, 12. 74741234. Thirty-four is the number of members that's a part of the gang and 7474 is when the GDs got started. 1974.

When I asked similar questions to Tyrese, he replied:

TYRESE: If they were really, really into, because a lot of people say they're a G, 'cause they say "on the 5" "on the 6" so people say it, but it don't really mean nothing. If you was really initiated and you was really gang banging then you would know it. You would have your colors on. You would be representing your colors. You would hear it in their slang. "What's up, cuz?" They call you cuz', they GDs. If they say, "What up, blood?" or "What up?" Cuz' is GD, bloods is Vice Lords, and you would always hear that slang because it became part of your life. It was a part of your personality. It was what you was, what you lived for. So if you really was, you would know it, and you wouldn't be afraid to tell it. They be like, "What's your colors, homie?" or "What up?" or they'll look at you. You on their set and you wearing red. "What up, cuz?" 'cause they know you ain't a cuz'. They going to say it because they letting you know that, "Hey you in the wrong territory." They letting you know that this is, "What up, cuz?" They saying cuz' because they are letting you know that's their language. And they know if you really gang banging you know. You know it all. So if I was coming and another G saw me or something and I was speaking to him, he'll shake up with you. You gotta know the hand shake. If you can't shake up there is no way you can be a part of it. 'Cause a lot of people claim it, a lot of people do but not even half the people are really out there living by the code. 'Cause you live by codes. You just know by the appearance by everything. If you can't tell if they are then they are not. They are not. A lot of people front and pretend. They just pretenders.

As indicators of authenticity, these symbols, gestures, and speech patterns, while stereotypical of gang life, were inherently problematic. Two significant deficiencies accompanied these symbols and diminished their ability to clearly differentiate real gang members from fake gang members.

First, the symbols used for verifying status were inconsistent, as members often differed in their opinions of which symbols validated gang membership. For example, a lick was often a source of confusion for gang members, and everyone in the streets did not accept the numerical sequence listed above. In fact, the numerical sequence of 74741234 might have been meaningful to one self-defined member of the Gangster Disciples, but it might have been meaningless to another. Without revealing the last four digits of the lick, I showed both younger and older Gangster Disciples the sequence of numbers, and most looked at it with confusion. Some gang members suggested that the significance of 74 did not come from the gang's date of origin, but it is a numerical code for GD. G is the seventh letter of the alphabet and D is the fourth letter of the alphabet, hence 74. Other gang members discussed how many so-called Gangster Disciples recited numerical sequences with little understanding of what the numbers meant. For some gang members, the lick was significant. For other gang members, it was not. Without unanimity, the lick could not be used to establish widespread legitimacy.

Second, where agreement did exist, the standards were susceptible to environmental skepticism. A central tenant of the dilution narrative was that youths gained insight into the more secretive aspects of gang life through illegitimate means, and the symbols used to validate gang membership were easily falsified. Youths could gain access to gang colors, speech patterns, literature, and licks through social contacts or Web sites. As noted in chapter 3, external evaluations of gang membership were often shaped by the belief that many self-defined gang members were fraudulently using these symbols. In effect, these symbols were too well known and embraced by youths outside of the field boundary. Therefore, someone saying, "What up, cuz'?" or flashing gang signs, displaying a tattoo, wearing colors, or even using coded numerical sequences, could be viewed skeptically by others in the gang environment. Moreover, descriptions of the clarification process were often accompanied by the caveat that many people used these symbols to claim gang

affiliation falsely. Gang members acknowledged that the indicators used for establishing field boundaries were flawed, that many so-called wannabes mirrored the appearance of real gang members. Thus symbols could not be used accurately to differentiate real gang members from fake gang members.

Gang members lacked clear means to gain the approval of others in their environment. The symbols traditionally used for validation had become so common that self-defined gang members struggled to discern authentic gang members from peers who falsely represented gang affiliation. More problematically, some gang members were likely to receive contradicting appraisals from peers in their environment. These gang members might have gained acceptance from some peers, but this acceptance did not eliminate the threat of rejection. The child who was standing on the corner spouting numerical sequences and claiming membership in the Gangster Disciples would have appeared to be a legitimate gang member to some observers, but he or she would have looked like a fool to others. This problem only increased for smaller cliques that embraced a gang identity. If childhood associates simply embraced the idea of being a gang, adopted a name, and made up a few rudimentary symbols to demonstrate their gang status, were they in a gang? This question influences formal scholarly attempts to define and measure gang membership, but it profoundly influenced the day-to-day lives of gang members in Indianapolis.

At its core, this dilemma on the streets of Indianapolis is an issue of environmental uncertainty caused by natural variations between gangs. It was exaggerated because gang members generally lacked boundary objects, or clear indices of authenticity that created an acceptable level of consensus about the parameters of “real.” Instead, gang members continuously participated in boundary work, but their efforts produced self-serving and subjective field boundaries. Since no collection of gangs had a monopoly on establishing the boundaries of “real” and “not real,” and since there was no collective effort to establish objective boundaries, focal gang members drew from their experiences to establish an understanding of “real” that included themselves and excluded others. Self-defined gang members who were dismissed by another gang attached a different meaning to the notion of “gang” and continued to propagate the dilution narrative. The gang labeled as fake also labeled other gangs

as fake. The objectivity that accompanies widespread agreement was replaced by innumerable self-serving and individually derived definitions of real gangs and wannabe groups.<sup>1</sup>

Self-serving understandings of “real” were born out of current or past gang associations. Each definer of “gang” was included within his or her boundary of “real.” This self-centeredness was quite apparent when talking to gang members. For example, Shauna, who was featured in chapter 2, used age to create a division between real and fake gangs. The point of division between the older, more legitimate gangs and the younger, reckless gangs also happened to be her age: twenty-five:

TL: How organized are gangs up here?

SHAUNA: Uh, I would have to break them up in age ranks. I would say this current generation, they don’t care. There’s no questions to be asked, there’s no thought process, there’s no loyalty . . . twenty-five and up I would consider more mafia status. Twenty-five and under its reckless gang banging. That’s what it is. It’s like taking the rules to how the gang is originally supposed to be, and you use it how you want to use it. There’s no godfather of the gang, there’s no ringleader in the gang. Each individual that’s in the gang, they are the ring leader.

During a later interview, I asked her about the standards used by the younger generation of gang members. She suggested that many youths had rejected the organized components of gangs, and they operated with little regard for the standards or purposive action exhibited by real gangs:

TL: So this newer generation of gangs, what are their criteria for joining?

SHAUNA: Nothing. Nothing. That’s the sad part about it. That’s why I say they took what they hear and what they learn about gangs from the past, and they build their own. Their criteria is you gotta’ steal, it ain’t even about stealing. Take what’s yours, get what you want. That’s their criteria, to have some balls. Be grimey, don’t show no weakness.

TL: No literature?

SHAUNA: No. They couldn’t even tell you who the first kingpin was. It’s about having a pistol and knowing how to shoot it. Being able to kill somebody, at least being able to wound somebody, ’cause it’s

nothing to having a gun if you've never really used it on somebody. You know that's their criteria. Have some money in their pocket. Get it the fastest, quickest way you can. And the more money you got you proved yourself, you somebody. Being able to have some type of transportation—don't care how you get it. Being able to sleep with as many girls as you want to and treat them as bad as you can. That's their criteria, I'm so serious. Nothing about respect and morals is involved in this younger generation's criteria. It's like how can you mix good with bad? But with the real gangs that's what it was about. It was about good and bad, you know because everybody in the gangs wasn't bad. A lot of people in the real gangs stood for something. To make you think about it's just like corporate America.

According to Shauna, gangs made up of individuals under the age of twenty-five represented deviations from pure or real gangs. She was not included in this group. Interestingly, however, the criteria she followed during her gang tenure were less than idyllic. For example, Shauna claimed to be a member of the Gangster Disciples, but she was in a relationship with an older male Vice Lord. Because of that relationship, she spent a significant amount of time as a teenager hanging out with Vice Lords. She sold drugs for them, fought with them, and was even involved in their shootings. Her close relationship with a female friend in the Vice Lords even caused Shauna to mark herself as a Vice Lord. Gangster Disciples wear blue and favor the right side of their bodies. Vice Lords wear red and favor the left side of their bodies. Each gang has signifiers that can be placed on the appropriate side of the body to claim membership. Often, gang members put a gold crown on an upper tooth located either in the right or left side of the mouth. Despite being a GD and favoring the right side, Shauna crowned a tooth on the left side of her mouth in honor of her Vice Lord friend. To many gang members, this act would have been a clear indication that Shauna was not a real gang member. To Shauna, the contradiction was a nonissue.

Ryan, a nineteen-year-old street participant, created a definition of real gangs based on his experience in another town. Born in St. Louis, he moved to Indianapolis when he was thirteen. He did not view the contrasts between St. Louis gangs and Indianapolis gangs to be subtle

differences between the two cities. Instead, he viewed St. Louis gangs to be real and Indianapolis gangs to be fake:

Gangs in St. Louis is like you grow up into it. Say like my uncle, he's GD or whatever. So my uncle is a GD, my brother is going to be a GD, and I'm going to be a GD. So if I cross that line, I'm going to get a taste. So like in St. Louis you raised in it. It's like a whole family is from one set. Down here it's like if you was born on Forty-sixth, so you going to claim Forty-sixth. You can move, whatever. It's fake down here. It's not like a real gang. Everybody is just talking about what street they're from. . . . Fake, somebody can claim it, "Ah I'm a G, I'm a G." Somebody could like try to call them out, and they don't know what they talking about. If you real you ain't got to talk, you just be who you are.

Ryan's interpretation of his experiences in two cities provided a clear depiction of a self-serving definition of "real." Gang members in Indianapolis did not look or act like gang members in St. Louis. When challenged, Indianapolis gang members could not provide an adequate justification for their claims of membership; their knowledge was not consistent with Ryan's understanding of "real." At no point did Ryan consider that the opposite might have been true.

This tendency to form a self-serving understanding of "real" could be applied to most gangs and gang members in Indianapolis. Individually derived understandings of gang were embraced and used to dismiss others within the social environment. Minor differences were the reason for overt dismissals, as few gang members considered that natural variations between gangs led to a diversified environment. Although each gang member assessed the validity of other environmental participants' claims to gang membership, each gang member also negotiated a skeptical environment. Certainty within a given group did not determine acceptance by others in the environment. When generalized, this generated a dynamic in which large numbers of self-defined gangs were free to dismiss each other.

#### LEGITIMACY

Despite the confidence of a given set of gang members and the immediate perception that symbols or codes can signify real gang

membership, the intergang environment is marred by uncertainty. Gang members must face the possibility that their faultless self-evaluations are incongruent with the assessments of others in the intergang environment. When that environment consists of confident, self-defined gang members who also embrace and enact the dilution narrative, inconsistent evaluations are inevitable. This produces a persistent need among self-defined gang members to prove to outsiders that they are indeed real gang members. Therefore, they are constantly pursuing legitimacy in the intergang environment.

The notion of legitimacy has been well developed by organizational theorists. At its most basic level, the pursuit of legitimacy occurs when a group seeks to justify its right to exist to other relevant actors (Dowling and Pfeffer 1975). Such justification only occurs when a group's actions are congruent with the expectations of relevant peers within a given field (Deephouse 1996; Galaskiewicz 1985; Kostova and Zaheer 1999; Pfeffer and Salancik 1978).<sup>2</sup> When contradicting appraisals exist, the dismissed group can only gain legitimacy by resolving the inconsistency. It must prove its place in the field by meeting the expectations of relevant field participants. When this occurs, members of the field come to view the group as legitimate. A group that has been labeled as illegitimate must, therefore, prove to established field participants that it belongs either by changing or by demonstrating that an error has been made.

Legitimacy is more complicated than just proving oneself to field participants, however. Two qualifying elements create a more detailed understanding of the relationship between groups, the intergroup environment or field, and the notion of legitimacy.

First, although legitimacy can be negotiated in the context of an overt challenge, more commonly it is continuously gained, maintained, or lost through routine interactions with field participants. Once established, legitimacy is resistant to isolated challenges, but it is still dependent on prior events (Suchman 1995). A group gains approval by establishing a pattern of behavior that matches the expectations of other field participants. Improper behavior before the establishment of legitimacy can lead to a general rejection of the group. An approved group can lose legitimacy but is afforded some margin of error. Inappropriate behavior in a few situations, or the inability of a group member to meet field standards, will not immediately reflect poorly on the group.

Although a legitimate entity can suffer some embarrassing events without being rejected, there is a threshold that can put it at risk for losing past gains. Thus the pursuit of legitimacy must be understood as a continuous process, whereby the illegitimate can become accepted, and the legitimate can be rejected. For gang members, concerns about legitimacy create a constant pressure, acutely felt through overt dismissals but experienced in all social settings.

Second, legitimacy is largely contingent on generally agreed upon norms that are used to distinguish legitimate groups from illegitimate groups. Through mutual interaction, field participants continuously create, define, and reinforce the tenets of appropriateness used to establish a field boundary (DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Scott and Meyer 1991). This process, though imperfect, typically leads to a general agreement about the required norms or standards for gaining acceptance into a given field. In organizational studies, for example, boundary lines are drawn according to an organization's function, form or appearance, output or product, or normative qualifications (DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Scott and Meyer 1991). When field participants agree on the requirements for inclusion, the process of gaining legitimacy is clear. A focal group must simply meet the expectations for field participation, and fieldwide acceptance will follow accordingly. Thus, certainty in the legitimizing process is directly related to the establishment of clear standards that are accepted by nearly all field participants. If such standards do not exist, ubiquitous acceptance is problematic, and the process of gaining and maintaining legitimacy is characterized by uncertainty. Universal acceptance may not be possible.

Intergang interactions create an enduring need to prove one's rightful place within the intergang environment. Pursuing legitimacy is a continuous process that is heavily dependent on established, clear, agreed-upon norms. For Shawn, Layboy, the DFW Boyz, and other Indianapolis gang members, claims of legitimacy must be impervious to the dilution narrative. The boys must be able to demonstrate to relevant field participants that their gang affiliation is not the byproduct of false avenues, such as dubious social relationships or the Internet. The boys must establish that they are not just a collection of children trying to act like a gang. They must rely on agreed-upon norms or standards to absolve doubt and prove that they belong within the boundaries of the

intergang field. If they cannot meet these standards, or if such standards do not exist, pursuing legitimacy becomes a tenuous endeavor.

THE PROBLEM OF CONTRADICTING  
APPRAISALS AND THE PARADOX OF  
LEGITIMACY

On a hot day in mid-June, the problematic nature of gaining and maintaining legitimacy in the intergang environment became readily apparent, as I again accompanied Layboy and Shawn during their daily activities. A few weeks had passed since my conversation with Layboy, Shawn, Jordan, and Joe. By that point in the research, frequent interactions allowed me to establish strong bonds with Shawn, Layboy, their older brother Aaron, cousin TJ, and another member of the gang, Lonnie. I was also friendly with, but not especially close to, a broader group of DFW Boyz and their associates. The drive to Indianapolis from Bloomington, like many other aspects of the research, had become taxing. I spent approximately ten hours each week (two to three hours each day) driving to and from the research site and many more hours in my car with the boys, as they liked to drive around the city. The hours of boredom that accompanied my time at the research site were perhaps more arduous. The activities of the gang members in this study revealed an odd contradiction. Because they participated in significantly more serious criminal behavior than their peers, and because they periodically committed troubling acts of violence, they were an interesting topic of research. Yet most of their activities were mundane, and they spent a large amount of time loafing around their apartments. Perhaps if the DFW Boyz were heavily invested in selling drugs, their days would have been more interesting. But on the few occasions that I witnessed drug deals, the act was understated, informal, and ignored by everyone else present at the time.

The boys seemed affected by the dullness of their life. They took advantage of any opportunity to keep busy during the day, and my willingness to escort them around the city seemed to alleviate their daily tedium. I often stopped by whatever apartment they had stayed at the night before, hung out for a while, and then drove them around the city. Some days they wanted to look for jobs, while other days they wanted to hang out with clique members who lived in the area. Almost every

day they wanted to get something to eat. At the end of each day I returned to my normal life of transcribing, taking and organizing notes, and teaching college classes, but the monotony of their days endured. Their nights and evenings were somewhat more active, as they occasionally went to parties and underage dance clubs, smoked weed, drank alcoholic beverages, had sex with girls, and sporadically got into fights, broke into homes, or robbed people. All of these activities occurred more frequently when they stayed at their brother Aaron's apartment on the east side of Thirty-eighth Street. Still, in the context of their day-to-day lives, their nights were largely uneventful.

I pulled up to Aaron's apartment around 10:30 in the morning, and the heat was already bordering on stifling. Loud music was blasting from the open windows of Aaron's second-story apartment, which reminded me that he did not have air conditioning. Layboy met me at the door of the apartment with his customary greeting, "TimTim." I responded as usual, "WhatWhat." This response always amused the boys. The apartment was less empty than it had been a few months earlier. Aaron had an older couch and loveseat, TV, Xbox, and a small table purchased at a thrift store. The apartment reeked of marijuana smoke, and two girls in their late teens were lounging on the couch. They did not seem particularly interested in me, and they were still groggy from waking up. The boys were more alert and seemed ready to leave the apartment. Aaron was notorious for his endless pursuit of women. His sexual indiscretions often created more problems than they were worth. On more than one occasion, a betrayed boyfriend had sought retribution by shooting at Aaron, and as a result he usually carried a gun. I did not know these girls, but Aaron clearly had no more use for them. He angrily told them they needed to get out of his apartment and walk home.

This day was like so many others in the course of this research. Most of the day was filled with monotonous activities capped off with a brief but significant set of interactions. Theoretical insights were often hidden in mundane events, and I could never predict when they would be revealed. Shawn and Layboy got into my car, while Aaron left with a friend. The boys' agenda for this day was to submit some job applications, get lunch, and meet up with other DFW Boyz. We canvassed the city in pursuit of potential job opportunities that never produced even

one interview. This was normal. Despite our efforts throughout the summer, Shawn, Layboy, and their cousin TJ could not find jobs. They rarely managed to get an interview. After a few hours, which included a customary stop at McDonald's, we gave up searching for jobs and began to focus on meeting up with other members of the gang.

The fragmented structure of the DFW Boyz often created challenges when attempting to hang out with members outside of Layboy and Shawn's immediate social circle. Without access to a centralized hangout, we usually drove to different houses or apartment complexes hoping to meet up with other members of the gang, only to find that they were out in the streets or at another location. Members of the DFW Boyz were difficult to track down, even for Layboy and Shawn. Much of the data used in this research was gathered only after long days spent in persistent pursuit of gang members. On this day our efforts proved to be unproductive, and we found ourselves aimlessly driving through the city. We eventually decided to reunite with Aaron and arranged to meet at a convenience store on the city's northeast side. As we stood in the shaded area on the store's west side, Layboy, Shawn, and I talked about sports, school, and their plans for that night. Such moments were not very exciting, but they accurately reflected the day-to-day events in the lives of these youth. The threat of violence in gang members' lives might have been ubiquitous, but the average gang member in this study was only sporadically involved in violent incidents, and most days in Indianapolis were uneventful.

I did not doubt that Shawn and Layboy were gang members and that the DFW Boyz constituted a gang. The group certainly reflected various descriptions and/or definitions of street gangs offered by other gang researchers (see Klein 2005). More importantly, the boys defined themselves as gang members, and they were quite persistent in their efforts to demonstrate to me that the DFW Boyz were taken seriously in the streets. Remember, for example, the hyperbolic statements made by Layboy, Shawn, and other DFW Boyz about the group's elite status in the streets. The gang was known and could take over a city block, apartment complex, school, or neighborhood if members desired to take over. However, my opinion did not matter. By claiming gang affiliation, the boys identified themselves as belonging to the intergang field. They considered themselves to be real gang members and believed that

peers should also recognize this fact. Shawn and Layboy also dismissively labeled other so-called gang members or groups as fraudulent. Such skepticism was a dominant characteristic of intergang interactions, and the boys were not immune to such negative evaluations. Therefore, the assessments made by other environmental participants were of more concern to Layboy, Shawn, and other DFW Boyz than those made by a relatively detached researcher. Although I was confident that the DFW Boyz was in fact a real gang, I had not forgotten the possibility that others in the intergang environment might view Layboy, Shawn, and the DFW Boyz as gang imitators.

Aaron eventually arrived at the store and suggested that we go hang out with some of his older associates. These individuals were not members of the DFW Boyz, nor were they familiar with Layboy or Shawn. With nothing else to do, the boys agreed, and we all got back into my car. Aaron directed me to an eastside neighborhood that I was relatively unfamiliar with. Earlier in the research process, I had spent some time with an individual in the same hood who had just been released from prison after serving time for two involuntary manslaughter convictions. Two men entered his home with the intent to steal his drugs and drug money, so he killed them. Free and on the streets, he had reverted back to dealing drugs and operated out of a house in this neighborhood. With the exception of the few hours I spent in that dealer's home, I had little working knowledge of this area. However, I knew that this area south of Thirty-eighth Street was also in the middle of another hotspot for crime and violence.

We stopped near a large, two-story house that had a crowd of people sitting on the front porch. Some of these people were members of Aaron's crew, and he got out to see if they were interested in talking to me. I got out of the car with Shawn and Layboy, but we stood by the car waiting for Aaron to verify that it was okay to approach the house. After a brief and unsuccessful attempt by Aaron to explain what I was doing, I decided to approach the porch and talk to the crowd myself. As I left the car, Layboy said, "I'm not going up there," and he stayed in the car with his brother and sipped some fruit punch that I had purchased for him earlier.

The individuals on the porch ranged in age from mid-teens to late forties. They were all relatives, and as I approached the porch, they were

deeply engaged in a discussion about professional basketball. Being an avid sports fan, I contemplated adding my own thoughts, but past attempts in similar situations had proved to be awkward. The individuals in this study did not seem to be interested in my insights about the NBA. I explained to them that I was a graduate student from a local university and I was researching local gangs. Interested, they looked over and signed my consent forms but agreed to talk to me at another time, since the ninety-degree temperature was too hot for an interview. However, during the course of a conversation about gangs, one of the older men said that he was from Chicago and that he had been connected to Larry Hoover, the well-known leader of the Gangster Disciples. He said that he would be able to tell me all about how they operated in Chicago, and he alluded to shootings and drug trafficking. He then gestured toward Shawn and Layboy, who were still at my car, and shouted, "Why you with them? They're not gang members, they just wannabes. They don't know Hoover or how it's really done. They just wannabes." As we left, a visibly angry Layboy sat in my front seat mumbling quietly about how everyone knew Hoover, and the man on the porch did not know what he was talking about. This brief but significant interaction between Layboy, Shawn, and the OG on the porch illuminated a fundamental dilemma on the streets. Layboy and Shawn embraced a gang identity, but they were immersed in an environment that was inherently skeptical about their claims.

In an environment where all gangs displayed high levels of internal confidence about the status of their gang and also claimed that most gang members falsely claimed affiliation, contradicting appraisals were bound to happen. This was most evident when someone had the audacity to openly challenge another person by labeling him or her as being a fake gang member, a false flagger, or a wannabe. Such dismissals represented an attempt by someone or some group to invoke the boundaries of an intergang field. Some self-defined gang members belonged within the boundaries of the intergang field, and some did not. Those who did not belong were to be mocked, challenged, and made aware of their inferior status.

The accusation of being a wannabe was indeed damning. The wannabe label did not refer to one's desire to become a gang member, nor did it denote a fringe member. It involved a clear declaration about the invalidity of one's claim to gang membership (Garot 2010).

Ironically, in an earlier conversation, Shawn and Layboy explained the significance of his term:

SHAWN: Somebody that's a wannabe just wants to fit in with the crowd.

LAYBOY: Yeah.

SHAWN: Just want to fit with the crowd.

LAYBOY: They don't want to feel left out. They think everybody else in the gang, and they got to get in the gang. . . . They ain't real.

Much like the individuals who were labeled as false flaggers or Internet gangsters, youths identified as wannabes claimed membership and played the part of a gang member, but they were not considered real. Their motivation for claiming membership was inappropriately based on fitting in and being like others. So-called wannabes claimed membership and mimicked gang affiliation by altering their appearance to look like gang members, using gang terminology, and learning superficial expressions of membership. These alterations were deemed false representations by outsiders who claimed to have inside knowledge about what was in fact real. However, the term "wannabe" was not just directed toward the social misfit who sought belonging through mimicry. The label could also be applied to groups and used to distinguish real gangs from wannabe gangs. Entire groups that defined themselves as gangs could be quickly dismissed as being a bunch of wannabes or a fake gang. According to the OG on the porch, the members of the DFW Boyz were not real gang members. Layboy and Shawn's internal certainty about their status as viable gang members was matched by external skepticism. In this context, they had been cast outside the boundary of the intergang field.

When confronted with an overt dismissal, the boys were limited in their ability to prove that they were indeed legitimate gang members. They could not access objective cues or boundary objects that would have communicated to the OG on the porch that they truly belonged in the intergang field. Any effort probably would have been discounted or used as evidence that gangs had become diluted in Indianapolis. This is the paradox of legitimacy, and such an experience was not uncommon in Indianapolis. Youths embraced a gang identity but encountered both overt and covert dismissive sentiments about their claims to gang membership. They had limited means to demonstrate their status as real gang members. The resulting question, then, becomes, how do gang members demonstrate their authenticity to skeptical peers?

## CONCLUSION

In Indianapolis, evaluations of legitimacy permeated intergang interactions. As members of different gangs, cliques, or hoods gathered in various social settings like school, parties, or clubs, they observed each other and made assessments about each other's right to belong. Such assessments were not, however, grounded in objective standards that were universally recognized by all gangs. Self-defined gang members displayed gang symbols, colors, or secret codes, but these superficial signifiers could not legitimize a person's rightful place within the intergang environment. The dilution narrative was too strong, and environmental participants remained dubious about such displays of affiliation. Therefore, the focal gang or gang member was potentially the source and target of environmental skepticism. Each gang member continuously struggled to demonstrate to peers that he or she was a legitimate gang member.

Indeed, the label of "gang member" was meaningful in the streets of Indianapolis, as it was constructed and used by gang members themselves. It was not just created by criminal justice personnel, school administrators and teachers, or parents and then thrust upon undeserved youth. It was not, as some have noted in other cities, a reified concept primarily used by researchers, criminal justice practitioners, policy makers, and the media to create public hysteria and reinforce the status quo (Brotherton and Barrios 2004; Cyr 2003; Fleisher 1995; McCorkle and Miethe 1998).<sup>3</sup> In Indianapolis, invested adults and criminal justice personnel were actually somewhat reluctant to use the term "gang." Shawn and Layboy, for example, often mentioned that their mother consistently denied their gang involvement. On numerous occasions, I observed a director of a nonprofit organization, who frequently interacted with gang members, publicly claim that the so-called gang members were just wannabes. Police, at least in public forums, also seemed more likely to deemphasize rather than exaggerate the gang problem in the city.<sup>4</sup> But to self-defined gang members, the notion of being a gang member was both important and problematic. They were invested in the concept, and the notion of being a real gang member served as a building block, category, or social construct that helped define their social reality.<sup>5</sup>

The construction of that reality often occurred during routine interactions with peers. Constructing reality is a dynamic and reflexive

social enterprise that is responsive to the input of individuals but, in turn, also influences their perceptions and behavior. This inherently social endeavor is best observed during routine conversations (Hollander and Gordon 2006). The self-defined gang members in this study routinely examined the way things were in their social environment. They observed the behaviors of peers and then, through conversations with close peers, framed that behavior according to an understanding of “real.”<sup>6</sup> As noted in chapter 3, they collectively talked about how the notion of “gang” had become diluted, how many so-called gang members were not real. As I will show in later chapters, gang members were actively involved in constructing characterizations of both themselves and others through gossip and conversation. These conversations relied on and reinforced the subjective boundaries of the intergang field. They also established an understanding of how real gang members should behave, and self-defined gang members were often motivated to “do gang” in social settings.

The impetus behind doing gang is, therefore, largely found in the intergang environment. One’s understanding of being a gang member is constructed through interactions with close peers and significant others, but it then must be performed in public settings. These performances are tailored explicitly to one’s peers; gang members are not particularly concerned with the opinions of detached outsiders. A teacher’s actions and opinions, for example, are only problematic if they cause peers to question one’s status as a real gang member.<sup>7</sup> In effect, being called a wannabe or being labeled as a deviant gang member by a teacher is inconsequential to a gang member’s sense of self, but it may induce a reaction if peers are nearby. An attack on one’s gang identity is only perceived to be serious if it is accompanied by social consequences. If it comes from someone who is largely considered irrelevant, it is easily ignored. Yet gang members are often immersed in social settings where the assessments of peers do matter, and the social consequences of one’s actions are a paramount concern. It is in these situations where one’s certainty in his or her gang status may be juxtaposed against environmental uncertainty. In these situations legitimacy in the intergang environment becomes problematic, and gang members struggle to demonstrate their place within the intergang field. This process is guided by the enduring question, what does it mean to be a real gang member?