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Unregulated desires: anomie, the “rainbow underclass” and second-generation Alevi Kurdish gangs

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This article offers a case study of the adaptation strategies of a section of second-generation young male Alevi Kurds in London and the social conditions which make some of them more prone to join gangs and to reject mainstream institutions in their search for instant material rewards. It is instructive to use Durkheim’s analysis of society’s integrative and regulative functions and particularly his concept of anomie to understand a situation where the legitimate means in the pursuit of material wealth and comfort are out of balance with the demand, calling into question the legitimacy of the institutions which provide these functions. Those who cannot compete through existing institutions are more likely to seek alternative means to achieve these ends. Durkheim identified youth as more vulnerable to such unregulated desires and I argue that his approach offers valuable insights into the anomic pressures confronting second-generation migrant young men in particular.

Key words: Alevi Kurds; anomie; Durkheim; ethnic gangs; rainbow underclass, transnational migration; youth gangs

This paper, using Durkheim’s concepts of anomie, regulation and integration, explores how underlying social structures within a transnational and cosmopolitan context operate to produce conditions in which some young Alevi Kurds are more prone to join gangs and to reject mainstream institutions (Cetin, 2016). During my fieldwork on suicide within the Alevi Kurdish community¹, members related how they believed that some of the suicides were linked to involvement with gangs, whose activities ranged from petty crime to more serious

¹ I have been doing research with the Alevi Kurdish community since 2010 when I began to conduct research for my PhD thesis on suicide amongst their second-generation young men within the UK and specifically within London. Whilst Alevi in London come from both the Turkish and Kurdish communities in Turkey, they are predominantly Kurdish and it is the Kurdish Alevi community that my research involves.

ones such as drug dealing, armed robbery, bribery and murder. Both the suicides and gang membership, although confined to a small group of young Kurdish Alevi men, were of increasing concern to the community which had otherwise successfully settled in London where the community flourished². The severity of the issue manifested itself in murders involving two rival Alevi gangs, the Tottenham Boys and the Bombers (*Bombacılar*) that operate in the Tottenham, Haringey and Hackney areas of London

(<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-11325134>). In response to these events the Alevi, Kurdish and Turkish community centres in London organised several panels and demonstrations demanding action by the police to stop the gangs from recruiting any more young men (Café, 2014; Smyth, 2013; Summers, 2010). The severity of the gang related violence for the AK community had been fuelled by the recent stabbings and killings of young members of the community (<https://www.telgraf.co.uk/binlerce-kisi-barislar-olmesin-diye-yurudu.html>; <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-48577738>).

In my previous research I identified Durkheim's anomic suicide as the type which best explained the social causation of the suicides amongst the second-generation young men and this also informs the analysis of the data on gangs. This is justified because it is a symptom of the same stresses associated with suicide, namely the impossibility of achieving material wealth and cultural goals (status, prestige, and respectability) through legitimate means and the lack of regulation provided by the family and the school.

Decker et al. (2009) suggest that in order to understand gang formation it is necessary to link the structural factors to the social context in which they occur and the group processes and activities associated with them (*cf* Bourgois, 2003). Hence, this paper begins by outlining Durkheim's concept of anomie and its application to street crime and more specifically to the processes of gang formation, which is then linked to the migration context in order to provide a theoretical framework to apply to the case study of second-generation Alevi-Kurds living in London. It will explain how a segment of the young men ended up in the "rainbow underclass" (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001), an anomic social position in which they formed gangs as an alternative means to achieve culturally/socially valued goals that they could not hope to attain through legitimate means, and the social and cultural consequences of their involvement.

² It is not the intention of this paper to contribute to the racist and xenophobic discourses and representations which criminalise ethnic minority groups, but the level of violence and reality of the problem cannot be denied and hence needs a sociological investigation. Indeed, it may well be the case that other gangs, of any ethnicity, are also formed in response to situations of anomie. For an extended defence of this position see Bourgois 2003)

Durkheim, anomie and gang formation

Anomie is Durkheim's most enduring and widely applied concept, especially in the field of criminology (Cloward, 1959; DiCristina, 2015). In *The Division of Labour* (2014[1893]), and further developed in *Suicide* (1996[1897]), Durkheim uses the concept of anomie to describe a state of society characterised by a sense of normlessness, a lack of regulation and integration, where the relationship between the individual and society has become disturbed³. Durkheim argues that individual desires and drives are regulated by the social forces that are generated by collective social life. For him society constrains individuals in two ways: firstly, through integration by instilling a commitment to the values and social norms of the group to which they belong; and secondly, by defining specific goals and the means to attain them and thus controlling what would otherwise be unlimited human desires and aspirations. To achieve and maintain a healthy social order, there must be an equilibrium between the individual and society in order for the individual to internalise a clear sense of achievable goals and the legitimate means to achieve them; otherwise, a state of anomie emerges where the individual no longer knows what is possible and what is not, "what is just and what is unjust", and which claims and expectations are legitimate and "which are immoderate" (Durkheim, 1996[1897], p. 253).

As DiCristina (2015) suggests, in contemporary criminology a Durkheimian perspective continues to underpin the theorising of crime. Durkheim argues that "an act is criminal when it offends the strong, well-defined sentiments of the collective consciousness" (Durkheim as cited in DiCristina, 2015, p. 318) and uses the concept of anomie to broadly characterise "insufficient regulation", in particular in *Suicide* to the insufficient regulation of human desires and the prompting of "violence by increasing competition in the struggle to satisfy desires" (cited in DiCristina, 2015, p. 321). At the extreme, this violence can be turned against the self through suicide or against others through murder. Interestingly, Durkheim also made brief reference to youth crime in *The Division of Labour*, something relevant to this analysis of gangs as he saw youth as more spontaneous and less able to exercise self-constraint or to respond to their

³ Strictly speaking a lack of integration refers to egoism rather than anomie, however, whilst appreciating Durkheim's theoretical distinction between integration and regulation and between egoistic and anomic egoistic suicide, in practice it is difficult to make a clear distinction between the two. Indeed, Durkheim himself wrote that egoism and anomie "have a peculiar affinity for one another... We know that they are usually merely two different aspects of one social state; thus it is not surprising that they be found in the same individual" (Durkheim, 1996[1897], p. 288).

family's efforts to control them. It follows, therefore, that because the regulation of young people's desires is less active, there is an increased likelihood of young people seeking to gain a competitive advantage in pursuing their desired goals without regard to the legitimacy of the means, including the use of violence.

DiCristina concludes that Durkheim's analysis of juvenile crime "may be the one type of deviance for which anomie is the central explanatory variable in his overall criminological perspective, although he never made this explicit" (DiCristina, 2015, pp. 325-326). Without the integration and regulation of individuals, there emerges a state of disorder in society which produces certain "pathologies" such as gangs and high suicide rates (Cloward, 1959). This structural analysis underpins most contemporary theorising of the structural causes of gang formation (Decker et al., 2009; Bourgois, 2003).

Decker et al. (2009) adopt the Eurogang Research Project's definition as a basis for global comparisons: "A gang is any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of their group identity" (Klein, 2005 as cited in Decker et al., 2009, p. 397). In the context of the UK, the definitions of what constitutes gangs have been controversial with critiques generally drawing attention to the negative impact of the definitions and their media representations on Black Minority Ethnic (BME) communities⁴. Equally, however, it must be recognized that the Eurogang Research Project's minimum definition does echo the use of the term "gang" within the Alevi community and by the participants interviewed for the research, and while acknowledging the danger of using the term "criminal gangs" and their exaggerated prevalence, as Samota (2008: 3) argues: "For families who have either lost a loved one to gang-related violence or whose children are at its sharp end, the idea of a 'gang' is certainly not mythical".

Despite contesting definitions, there has been remarkable consistency in theorising the social, cultural and structural conditions of gang formation through social disorganisation theory. Messner and Rosenfeld (2007) argue that "responding to anomie or strain is one of the important causes of gang formation" (cited in Decker et al., 2009, p. 328) and Decker et al. (2009) suggest that the problem arises in societies "imposing a consistent definition of success

⁴ For a critical approach to the definition and representation of the gang see [Alexander, C. \(2008\) *Rethinking Gangs*. Runnymede.](#)

and limiting the opportunity structure to obtain that success which create a set of unrealistic success goals” (p. 398). From this Durkheimian perspective the mismatch between the culturally defined goals and access to legitimate means to achieve them plays a key role because gangs are predominantly formed as an alternative to blocked opportunity structures at a time when juvenile desires are unregulated. According to Decker et al., what also must be incorporated into gang analysis, and very relevant for the analysis presented in this paper of a transnational community although it is not its focus, are the transnational cultural influences on gang formation of media glamorisation and representations of mafia-style gang life which serve as a model for real life gangs⁵. This is evidenced when second-generation migrants are influenced by popular cultural aspirations of achieving an American-style dream of material wealth and comfort but which are portrayed in the media as being achieved through illegitimate means such as gangs (Nightingale as cited in Decker & Winkle, 1996, p. 273).

Finally, in order to understand the formation of Alevi-Kurdish gangs in London, it is necessary to address the transnational context of their migration and assimilation because as Decker et al. (2009) point out, most criminological studies on immigration document that the history of gang formation is linked with the arrival and settlement of new immigrant groups. However, whilst immigration, ethnicity and culture are important components in understanding gang formation, the structural and social conditions present in the place of settlement are crucial in order for gangs to form. These include urban processes in certain parts of cities associated with ethnic succession, few job opportunities, poverty, disadvantage and social disorganisation (Portes, 2010; Bourgois, 2003). In this context, social disorganisation theory emphasizes the rapid social change brought about by migration in which gang activities are the products of the weakened social control of the adults of immigrant groups over their youth, or of a mismatch between immigrant social organization and life in Western society. This social disorganization perspective sees gangs as arising from the breakdown in social order within immigrant groups. “Gangs may also be seen as providing an alternative form of social order in the face of the inadequacy or loss of traditional social controls” (Bankston iii: 1998:37). It is widely agreed that there is a close relationship between gangs and migration because gangs mostly emerge out of underprivileged migrant neighbourhoods where there are no future prospects and fewer job opportunities in the ethnic and mainstream labour market (Portes, 2010). However, it must

⁵ One of the participants, who was also an ex-gang member, Burhan, said “if you go to the tea houses, where these gangs usually go, you will see that the members pretend like the characters of the Turkish mafia series such as the Kurtlar Vadisi/Valley of Wolves or recently Ezel”.

be noted that, the similar context can provide conditions for white working-class youth to become involved in similar activities such as resisting the mainstream values and gangs (Bourgois, 2003; Mares, 2000; Willis 1977).

To summarise, following Decker et al. (2009), this paper proposes a Durkheimian influenced framework for gang analysis which draws on social disorganisation theory and a macro-level structural analysis of a transnational migrant community and its second-generation youth. However, to this will be added an analysis of the micro-level neighbourhood context of gang formation and group processes derived from ethnographic observations to demonstrate the relevance of the societal causes of anomie to an understanding of its effects at the individual/group level (cf Bourgois 2003). To do this it is necessary to outline the relationship between particular forms of adaptation taken by migrant communities in order to provide the social context for the analysis of gangs.

Transnational migration, segmented assimilation and the anomic “rainbow underclass”

In this vein, the concepts and perspectives used to analyse the adaptation modes of migrants have undergone significant revision (Alba & Nee, 1997; Heisler, 2008). Portes and Zhou (1993) have criticized classical assimilation/integration theories for predicting that new migrants would follow a unidirectional trajectory, abandoning their ethnic and cultural traits to assimilate or not into the mainstream society. This they see as inadequate because while new migrants did assimilate they assimilated into different layers of the mainstream society. Hence, they offer a “segmented assimilation” model that identifies three possible assimilation patterns for new immigrants and their children dependent upon a set of “individual level factors and contextual factors” (Zhou, 1997, p. 984). One of the assimilation paths conforms to the “upward mobility pattern” where immigrants enter into the mainstream middle-class through acculturation followed by assimilation (Portes & Zhou, 1993, p. 82). Another trajectory is the economic integration of the immigrants into middle-class Western society through acculturation while maintaining a strong attachment to their own ethnic cultural norms and values. The last one, is “the downward-mobility pattern” which produces acculturation and assimilation into the “rainbow underclass”, that is an existing underclass made up of different ethnic minorities in permanent poverty (Portes & Zhou, 1993, p. 82). In this respect, one segment of transnational society and its adaptation patterns identified by Portes et al., namely the “rainbow underclass”, closely resemble an anomic context as defined by Durkheim (see above). It is in this location

that a section of the second-generation Alevis ended up where they formed gangs. But first it is important to provide a clear description of the context in which the journey into the rainbow underclass starts; in other words to explain what factors contribute to one's direction into the rainbow underclass. According to Portes & Zhou (1993) the journey to the underclass is shaped by the set of resources, or lack of them, that migrants can draw on when tackling the obstacles they face in the country of settlement. These include their social, economic and cultural capital, the government's migration policies at the time, racism, available opportunities in the labour market, mobility ladders, and settlement in poor neighbourhoods with limited job opportunities. The negative effects of these key factors can push migrants towards the rainbow underclass (Portes and Zhou 1993). While Portes and Zhou identify these as risk factors nevertheless they argue that it is possible to avoid falling into the oppositional culture of the rainbow underclasses if there is support and resources at the community and family level available to the second generation.

Conscious of the criticism that the concept of the "rainbow underclass" is in danger of oversimplifying the diverse experience of ethnic migrants by putting them into a single category of "the underclass" (e.g. Massey, 1993; Cameron et al., 2012: 23; Waldinger and Feliciano, 2004), this paper uses the concept not as some monolithic undifferentiated underclass but rather as a device to capture the interplay between the structural processes and individual attributes which produce inequality for the second-generation Alevi Kurds, some of whom end up in gangs.

Method

Data for this paper are predominantly derived from the author's previous research (Cetin, 2014) and the on-going collaboration with the UK's Alevi community around the Religion and Identity Project (Jenkins and Cetin, 2018).⁶ More specifically, it uses data gathered from interviews with eighteen second-generation⁷ Alevi Kurds associated with peers who were involved in postcode⁸ gangs, four of whom self-identified as ex-gang members (Burhan, Münir, Kadir, Bahri)⁹ and had served some time either in prison or youth offender institutions. The

⁶ This collaborative research involving the university, community and local schools was started in 2010 to address youth issues and their negative identity. Since then, lessons on Alevis have been taught in local schools to help Alevi pupils feel a greater sense of belonging.

⁷ As an operational definition, the term "second generation" refers to the children of Alevis who were born in the UK or brought to the UK before adolescence.

⁸ The nature and formation of postcode gangs are discussed later.

⁹ For ethical reasons, all of the names are fictitious, and the age of the participants are deliberately omitted.

data gathered from the interviews provided an understanding of the significant events and relationships which underpinned the processes by which they or their peers had abandoned school and ended up in gangs. Interviewees were accessed by using a snowballing technique and the interviews were conducted in places determined by the participants. Only a few of the interviews were tape recorded as the majority did not allow any recording device to be used, however detailed notes were taken. The data from the interviews were supplemented by data gathered through participant observation, and by participating in panels and cultural events organised by the Alevi, Kurdish and Turkish community centres around the same issue. Media coverages and informal conversations with the community spokespersons and members of the community also provided a rich source of information for this paper.

The first-generation Alevi Kurds

With a population estimated at between fifteen to twenty million in Turkey, Alevi are the second largest religious group after Sunni Muslims. While the majority of Alevi are ethnically Turkish, around twenty per cent of them are ethnically Kurdish, Kurds being the second largest ethnic group in Turkey. Due to their religious and ethnic difference from Turks and other Kurds, Alevi Kurds, who are the subject matter of this research, shared a marginal socio-economic and political position prior to their migration to the UK, a migration that began largely in 1989 (Cetin, 2017). Their peculiar history and ambiguous relationship with the Turkish Republic make Alevi Kurds a “twice minority” (Gold, 1992) because of their religious and ethnic marginality.¹⁰ It is this marginality and history of persecution and exclusion that recurs in Alevi Kurdish history, reconstructing and sustaining the social boundaries of their collective identity as a distinct ethno-religious community separate from those surrounding them such as Sunni Turks and Kurds, as well as Alevi Turks. This also functioned as a reason to migrate to western countries.

The first generation of Alevi Kurds were mainly asylum seekers escaping persecution in Turkey (Jenkins & Cetin, 2017; McDowall, 2002). When they arrived in the UK they followed a pattern of settlement which Morawska (2009, p.18) terms “an ethnic-path adaptation within their own communities”. As in Portes and Zhou’s first and third patterns of segmented assimilation the migrants placed a high value on upward social mobility through hard work, however this

¹⁰ For a detailed account of the persecuted exclusion of the Alevi Kurds see Cetin (2017).

entailed their economic and social integration within the boundaries of their own ethnic community. This was made possible in part by housing policies that accommodated them in the same areas that already had established community centres which could cater for them, thereby allowing the maintenance of a strong sense of community. Moreover, there was employment available in the local ethnic labour market, predominantly in the textile and service industries, which established strong transnational engagements with their home country. Furthermore, their lack of English made it difficult for them to transcend the boundaries of their ethno-religious community to acculturate into mainstream society. These factors created a self-sufficient and internally integrated community that provided an effective integrative and regulatory mechanism for the first generation who on the whole had flourished in their new environment. There were, of course, exceptions and some of the first and more of the second generation were educated in the UK and followed the third assimilation trajectory of upward mobility into the mainstream labour market although still maintaining strong community ties. However, a section of the first, but more of the second generation educated in the UK, experienced the second assimilation trajectory of downward mobility towards “a new rainbow underclass” (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001, p. 45) with a consequent lack of legitimate opportunities for material advancement leading some of them to seek alternative means to achieve their desired goals, one of which was through membership of gangs.

Second-generation Alevi gangs in London: the risk factors tipping youth into the “rainbow underclass”

To understand the second-generation Alevis’ descent into the “rainbow underclass”, it is necessary to identify the risk factors associated with it and their engagement with gangs as a result of changes in their family circumstances and their failure at school. Drawing on the Durkheimian derived framework of Decker et al. (2009, 2013) elaborated above, the analysis explores the formation of gangs, and their types, and the social consequences of their engagement in them.

One of the first changes identified by the second-generation participants was a change in family structure from an extended to a nuclear form. Coming mainly from rural areas of Turkey (Maras, Kayseri, Malatya, Dersim and Sivas), they were used to living with an extended family but on settlement in the UK they were offered separate accommodation in nuclear family units.

We were about twenty people in the same house when we were in the village [...] here we were given a house in Ilford. It was the first time we were alone in one house only as members of my family. I mean dad, mum and brothers, sisters. (*Münir*)

This quote illustrates how in the process of settlement, the traditional family and kinship ties were gradually being transformed through a process of “nuclearization” (Rubinstein, 1992). In this more intimate home environment, parents alone had to deal with the “unfamiliar” challenges that it and urban living created, such as conflict between parents and children over lifestyle and diverse future trajectories that were not always compatible with the parents’ culture and expectations (Rubinstein, 2002). In such a situation, parents wanted to provide a “good future” for their children, by which they meant a good education and eventually a well-paid job. Children were constantly told that they must study to get good qualifications because their parents had not had the same opportunities in Turkey and had migrated to give their children a better future.

Although most participants reported success at primary school this harmony between parental expectations and children’s performance was disturbed when the students progressed to secondary school where they found it harder to keep up academically and felt the huge pressure of fulfilling their parents’ ambitions¹¹. Despite the parents’ best intentions towards their children’s education, difficulties arose when a dramatic “role reversal” within the family sphere took place once the children had learnt some English (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001, p. 193)¹². As many parents had poor English, they came to rely on their children in dealing with the bureaucratic necessities of living in London such as dealing with the local authority, the health service and other agencies. This participant’s experience was typical:

At the age of ten or eleven, I became the interpreter of the family. I was filling in the forms; I was taking my mum and dad to the doctor, council, job centre, etc. Everything in the family falls upon you. You are responsible for everything in the family. I was going to the family appointments instead of going to my school. I was missing at least one day a week. (*Tayyar*)

¹¹ For an extensive analysis of the relationship between parent, school and Alevi children in London see Jenkins (2020 in this issue).

¹² Role reversal refers to the reallocation of the responsibilities normally associated with parents, which in the process of settlement in the UK are reassigned to children. This bears similarities to Durkheim’s concept of domestic anomie discussed earlier whereby parents cannot fully meet their children’s needs.

This role reversal created various unintended and unforeseen consequences including the loss of parental control over their children (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). The parents' poor English and lack of understanding of the education system in the UK were the two main reasons for this.¹³ Children were able to manipulate their parents through their superior understanding of English, so, for example, whenever a report or letter arrived from school regarding absenteeism, trouble or underperformance, the children either mistranslated them or destroyed the correspondence altogether, especially if they were about to be excluded from school. Burhan and Raci describe the situation clearly:

One day I came home and there was a letter from the school to inform my parents that I was expelled from the school for a few days. I translated this to my mum that the school is taking us on a trip for a few days and I need to take thirty pounds with me. She said OK and gave me the money. (*Burhan*)

The school was sending letters to my mum about my absenteeism or when I had been excluded or involved in trouble. I was waiting for the post and sometime destroying the letter without telling my mum. If she found the post before me I was just making up a different story or telling her that its nothing. (*Raci*)

The data revealed that all the participants were involved in anti-school formations before finally being permanently excluded from their secondary school¹⁴. The problem started when they progressed into secondary school and started "disliking" school for various reasons. One of the most important was a change of school due to changes in their housing situation which meant that they were moved away from their friends.

I was doing ok [at school] until we were given another council flat and had to move to another shool. As soon as I entered the new classroom the teacher made me sit next to another Turkish speaking Alevi student and told me to copy from him. The teacher did not have any intention of helping me nor teaching me anything. I never had any support from that school. It was only copying from the friend. A couple of months went like this

¹³ Alevi parents told me that they believed their children would get the best possible education in England and just sending their children to school was enough and never anticipated any issues like racism or discrimination. Even when parents wanted to assist with their children's school work, they lacked the requisite skills and knowledge to do so.

¹⁴ A few participants described being temporarily excluded a few times before being permanently excluded. However, even these temporary exclusions made them lose interest in education and led them not re-engage with it. Once permanently excluded, of course, they stood little chance of receiving much formal education.

and when the other student did not show me his work for me to copy, I found it impossible to do it myself. It was not possible; I could not do my work myself. (*Munir*)

As the quote above illustrates a further factor was the relationship with teachers and whilst most participants remembered that some teachers had been really helpful, more often they felt that teachers had been unfair to them, explaining this by attributing to the teachers' racist attitudes. This produced what Alexander (2000, p. 91) calls an "atmosphere of distrust". Nine of the students were excluded for violence against their teachers and two of the participants (Nahit and Burhan), who were excluded for attacking their teachers, believe that they had been victimized by "racist" teachers.

When I started secondary school the science lesson was delivered in Turkish. Majority of the students in the school were also from Turkey (Alevi, Kurdish, Turkish) But the new head teacher came and [...] just cancelled the lesson [...] The head teacher was a racist Asian woman. (*Nahit*)

I was expelled permanently from the school because I had beaten up my Turkish teacher. He was a racist...he insulted and bullied us, he was hating us [Kurds and Alevis] (*Burhan*)

The respondents are convinced that school did not treat them fairly because whenever there was a fight between them and other students (especially black students) the school protected the latter even though they were to blame. Most of the participants considered themselves to be victims of a system against which they had no power except to use physical violence, despite knowing the consequences. Here the boys' masculine identity also became important as they tended to "correct a wrong" by using physical violence as an expression of that masculinity. In the case of these young people, Durkheim's link between anomie and youth crime is highly relevant but his idea that the desires of youth can be regulated through education (DiCristina, 2015) must be seen as overly optimistic in thinking that this regulation could be provided by the school. As Portes and Rumbaut (2001, pp. 60-61) argue, such children see the school and teachers as an "instrument of racial oppression and of education itself as incapable of bettering their situation". Durkheim's solution of replacing family authority with that of the school to regulate young people was doomed to failure in this case once the participants had lost faith in the education system. At this point, education loses its integrative and regulative functions and

ceases to be seen as a legitimate means for the Alevi Kurd youth to achieve the culturally valued goals to which they and their parents had so aspired.

Disengagement from school was closely related to problems arising from the ethnic divisions at school which all participants confirmed as the basis for fights between Alevi and black students, and was the starting point for many of them joining school gangs (a term used by respondents, parents and children). Echoing Alexander (2000), the boys used the school context to challenge the “dominance of blacks” although this was due in part to the prejudices of the parents who believed that they had been marginalized and victimized by the black population when they first arrived in the UK. Initially, these school gangs, an early mode of gang formation, were primarily formed for protection purposes but there was the potential for their confrontational activities to escalate as ethnic groups formed their own gangs beyond the school.

When I was in secondary school, I was told that I should always stick to the Turkish¹⁵ area; otherwise I would be attacked and robbed by blacks. I did not want to be involved in any fights, anything like that. One day I saw two Indian (Asian) boys coming toward me and they demanded that we leave the area for them. That time we fought but the fight got bigger. Indians and blacks came together and we decided to fight in the park—Highbury. The Turkish group [Kurds and Alevis] was thirty people with sticks, knives, hammers, chains, etc. (*Çetin*)

In many ways the conflict between the black and Alevi students can be seen to have originated from the social context in which the Alevi Kurds had first settled in the ethnically diverse and disadvantaged neighbourhoods of London characterized by ethnic conflict and a counter-school culture. As Clarke et al (2006: 5) puts ‘each group makes something of its starting conditions [...] groups which exist within the same society ...to a certain extent share each other’s ‘culture’’. The ethnic tension often resulted in violent fights that not only led to the exclusion of the Alevi students from school but also pushed them towards membership of gangs who could offer them protection. The participants relate how fights were often over the control of respective territories and proving “who is the boss” (see below). They also claimed that the

¹⁵ Almost all the second-generation Alevi and Kurdish youths initially used the term “Turkler” (Turks) when they talked about their groups in the schools as opposed to others especially “Blacks”. They started to use “Kurd” or “Alevi” when they started to talk about their Turkish teachers and when they started talking about other ethnic groups separately (Somalis, Jamaicans, Kosovans, etc.).

black youth had at some point insulted and humiliated them by demanding obedience to their rules both inside and outside the school through the use of physical and verbal violence. The Alevi students involved in these fights saw gangs as a necessary group formation to counter the threat posed by black youth and according to the Alevi youth interviewed, it was this background of violence that forced them to unite and challenge the black dominance and gain control of the territories that were once controlled by black gangs.

When our people first came here, they suffered a lot from the physical and verbal violence came from the blacks. For this reason, my family has always told me that I should keep away from them because they can be very brutal. This created a negative image of the blacks in my head... In fact, my first mobile phone was taken away from me by the black boys, they beat me up badly. I never forget that; I am not racist, but I still have that hate against those black boys. (Burhan)

Q: who were you fighting with?

Munir: Of course, the blacks in Hackney, Dalston...

Q: why?

Munir: You are walking along the street; you look at them they look at you and that's it you just find yourself in a fight. Maybe we were trying to gain some respects for ourselves.

Q: what do you mean by respect?

Munir: I mean it was like 'look I am not scared of you anymore' kind of thing. It was a war to gain control of the area because everyone was talking about how strong blacks [gangs] were and we just wanted to defeat them and show them who the boss is.

This has strong parallels to the situation of the Bengali boys in London described by Alexander (2000, p. 105) who justified their group formations as a means to "stand up for themselves" against the pre-existing black gangs who were seen, until then, as the dominant group on the streets and in the schools. In this sense the "gang" becomes a replacement for social and physical resources and also functions, as we shall see, as a regulative mechanism and central reference point for these young people. Many of the participants describe how they and their friends joined school gangs for protection and whilst for some it was their only engagement and did not necessarily derail their educational achievement, for others, the taste for violence and

fighting and the consequent trouble at school consolidated their anti-school feelings and often led to them to be permanently excluded from school and more fully engaged in gang activities (cf. Kinnear, 2009). The gangs were formed in part to imitate and contest the “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell, 2002) of black youth and so, by engaging in physical conflict with these black youth, sought to transform their “marginal masculinity” into a more “respected” one.

Postcode gangs

The anti-school groupings and activities described above were defined as “gangs” both by the participants and the community and can be seen as the first stage of gang formation amongst Alevi youth. The second type of gang formation is the “postcode gang”. This type of formation seems to be more consistent with both the academic and everyday common-sense definition of gangs (Decker et al., 2009). While the school and postcode gangs share some common features (in terms of ethnicity, territory and age) these two formations also show marked differences, one of the most important being the orientation of the organizations. The school gangs are usually organized for protection and to fight for dominance between black and Alevi youth over physical and symbolic territory, whereas the postcode gangs are entirely profit-oriented organizations with conflict concerned mainly with maintaining a physical territory (postcode) for the distribution of drugs. With their rigid hierarchical structure consisting of only a few people at the top and about fifty low-ranking members or “soldiers” at the bottom, the postcode gangs have a rigid internal division of labour. According to the participants the “soldiers” are organized into groups or cells of four and are used to distribute low-grade drugs such as marijuana and cannabis, which they do all day within their postcode. Although the desire to participate in a hedonistic lifestyle seems to be an important motivation in becoming associated with a postcode gang, membership, like membership of the school gangs, can still fulfil the need for protection. Indeed, three of the former gang members state that the main reason for their participation was fear over their safety within their own locality although, as the next quote shows, this did not preclude a recognition of other benefits in terms of the associated material and status benefits. Interestingly, there is also a strong expression of belonging to a larger community. This hints at an alternative regulatory regime as discussed by Durkheim, but provided not by the school but by the gang.

I was expelled from the school permanently. I had no plans for the future at that moment. I did not care about anything, I was not the boy who came from the village, I lost connection

with my community values, family values. I was a different person. The only thing we were doing was to drink, club, drug and fight with the blacks. (*Munir*).

Mine was purely about protection. When we had a fight, by making one call we had so many people behind us. No one could touch us after. [...] It is something like you are untouchable in your ends [postcode]. (*Bahri*)

Gang life as a future trajectory

The four former gang members interviewed confidently assert that it is not difficult for the postcode gangs to recruit “soldiers”. School children who want to smoke and drink cannot purchase these things with the pocket money they receive from their parents and the easiest way to get the money is through the gangs (Kinnear, 2009). The postcode gangs target school children both as a population to whom they can sell drugs and as a population from which to recruit new members. Those who decide to drop out of school, or who have dropped out already, tend to put recreation first (Kinnear, 2009; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Since these activities cannot be financed with pocket money from their parents, and given that they are unlikely to get a job due to their lack of qualifications and experience as well as how they present themselves to potential employers because of their appearance (tattoos, hairstyle and style of dress code, attitude towards regular employment) and way of speaking, local gangs can appear to be an attractive alternative.

You either go and rob people on the street or do other things, the money had to come from somewhere. The pocket money mummy gave was not enough anymore. (*Münir*)

According to the participants, most of the members joined gangs because they wanted to make a living without doing the “donkey work”, that is employment offered in the ethnic labour market. According to many participants, Alevi Kurdish children are brought up in a context in which “being rich” is an idealized goal but since they believe that they cannot achieve this through education and legitimate employment they turn to gangs as an alternative means of achieving their material goals (cf. Cloward, 1959; Merton, 1968; Kinnear, 2009; Van Gemert, 2008). A clear description of a situation of Durkheimian (and Merton) anomie where there is a mismatch in society’s ability to regulate the balance between goals and means.

We can't apply to good jobs because we don't have the qualifications. I knew it was risky but I did not care because if police caught me with some marijuana I would serve a maximum six months in prison [...] I don't care about the criminal record because I knew I would never work for a big firm [formal institution]. (*Serdar*)

At this point it is useful to examine more closely why the second-generation youth interviewed saw the ethnic labour market as unable to meet their needs (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Portes & Zhuo, 1993). Apart from two of the respondents, the rest ended up in paid employment within the ethnic labour market, exactly where they did not want to be. They had their first experience of such work during weekends and holidays, or when their parents realised they were not doing well at school to show them just how hard working life would be if they did not study. However, by that stage of secondary school they had already lost faith in education as a route to upward mobility into the mainstream labour market as these three respondent demonstrate.

There were so many people who had university degrees but were still gambling and spending their time in those places like us because they could not find a job. That time I told myself that what is the point of studying and spending money if I am not going to find a good job? I thought I'd better find a job and start to earn money as soon as possible. (*Raci*)

I thought instead of going to school to waste my time and money, I'd find a job and earn money. I left the school without doing my GCSEs. (*Çetin*)

During secondary school the participants could not wait to start paid work, understanding better than their parents that they had little chance of succeeding academically because they lacked the requisite social and cultural capital (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). However, almost as soon as they started working in the ethnic labour market they felt disappointed and disengaged because the nature of the jobs they were doing and their earnings could not deliver the lifestyle they expected. In Durkheimian terms they had set themselves unrealistic goals and the means for achieving them leading to disillusionment with what might be seen as the legitimate means for achieving material advancement.

I went to Wales to work in a kebab shop. But soon I realized that it was unbearable. All your time, even your day off is spent at the shop because you don't know

anywhere/anyone. That job makes you lose your brain believe me. I could only stay there for five months and came back to London. (*Nahit*)

An off-licence was my first job. I was excited too. I was working sixteen hours a day, six days a week. After a while it gets on your nerves. (*Raci*)

Raci and Nahit's negative experiences echo Durkheim's description of the abnormal division of labour (Durkheim, 2014[1893]) where work is something imposed and out of the worker's control (a forced division of labour) and also isolating, dull and repetitive (an anomic division of labour). However, despite being disengaged and alienated from almost all aspects of their work, they were also aware of the fact that better jobs were beyond them.

Of course, I want to buy the kebab not cut it and sell it on Friday or Saturday nights after coming out from the clubs and bars with my friends. But we don't have a chance to find a job in good firms because we don't have appropriate qualifications. I am now working in a kebab shop. I am going to work like a donkey till I am thirty-five and then buy a few houses and rent them out to travel wherever I and my wife want to. (*Serdar*)

Nevertheless, they too had aspirations like their parents, however unrealistic. Even Serdar's assertion that he would buy a few houses when he reached thirty-five was unachievable because his weekly wage did not leave him anything to save. It is these working conditions that a section of the Alevi youth resisted having seen their parents doing these jobs too, and thus sought an alternative means to achieve their material and immaterial goals of money, status, fame and protection by joining gangs (cf. Cloward, 1959; Decker & Winkle, 1996; Merton 1968-1938; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Van Gemert 2008).

Struggling to move higher in the world of gangs

The participants stated that membership of a postcode gang is relatively short lived as it can only provide sufficient income for the top-ranking leadership to achieve the desired lifestyle. Some of the postcode gang members aspire to move up and join the bigger organisations despite knowing the dangers involved. The third stage of gang formation is thus much more serious, modelled on the Mafia it refers to highly organised criminal gangs run predominantly by Alevi Kurds namely the Tottenham Boys and the Bombers, well known by the community due to

their continuing violence and criminal activities in north London¹⁶. There is a general view amongst the participants, and confirmed by the four ex-gang members, that initially these organizations were formed by Alevi school boys to fight with the black students in a Hackney school. Later, they were pulled into the drug business by an international Kurdish drug baron (Atay 2002; Pettifor et al., 2015; Thompson, 2006), and it is to this level that some Alevi youth in the postcode gangs aspire. The following extended quote from one of the former members gives a taste of what it was like being at this level of gang involvement:

When you reach your twenties, you want to earn real money. Then you try to climb up and enter the higher stage [...] because you can't get into the world of fathers¹⁷ easily. So when you want to live a life like this you have to prove yourself. For example you have to down a few men [shoot or stab] to be trusted by them [...] Money, status and fame. Nothing else. I asked everyone [Alevis] in the prison and found out that they all began that journey for the same reasons: for a Range Rover, for a BMW, for an X5. Or they were in love with a rich girl and the poor guy wanted to make a hundred K to have their wedding party and open his own shop and give up. Since it was impossible to earn that sum by working, they began to sell drugs. (*Bahri*)

Membership clearly offers material rewards but it also offers a regulatory system that provides a sense of community and even family as reflected in terms such as “big brothers” and “real fathers”. Paradoxically gang membership is both an expression of anomie in the form of an unregulated desire for material rewards along with a lack of regulation by the community, the family and the school, but also an answer to it, not only in providing access to the means of achieving desired goals but also in providing integration into a community, a regulatory system that provides both guidance and a sense of belonging. For these reasons, however, once the individual gets into such a circle, and only a few succeed in reaching leadership levels that pay for an extravagant kind of lifestyle¹⁸, it is extremely difficult to leave (Decker & Winkle, 1996). At this point, members can feel trapped and if they try to leave they are often subject to violence, or their families or girlfriends threatened. Some even take their own lives as the only way out

¹⁶ Could Turkish and Kurdish gangs become new 'mafia'? <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-11325134>

¹⁷ This was used to refer to big bosses, mafia leaders who control the smaller groups.

¹⁸ For the Alevi Kurdish youth in the UK, having an expensive wedding party/ceremony is a platform where they can display their economic and social status. The wedding industry is one of the fastest growing in London.

while those who are successful in leaving may experience a sense of disengagement and disorientation (a consequence of anomie) that itself can lead to suicide (Cetin, 2014, 2016).

Conclusion

This article has applied Durkheim's concept of anomie in explaining the involvement of the Alevi Kurdish youth in gangs and the social consequences for them of transnational migration. The examination of the diverse assimilation trajectories followed by the first- and second-generation Alevis directly illuminates how the social organisation of the community functions, or does not function, as a regulative and integrative mechanism for individuals, particularly in relation to the achievement of material goals. The integrative and regulative influence of the relatively tight-knit community established by the first-generation Alevis, linked to their persecuted exclusion in Turkey, became weakened for a segment of second-generation young men. A number of risk factors affecting the second generation became associated with the settlement in new communities and the pressure from parents for their children to fulfil the aspirations that they had for them. As a result some young men distanced themselves from mainstream institutions such as their families, school and the labour market and joined various forms of gangs. This trajectory can be characterized as a downward assimilation into a "new rainbow underclass" (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001), a social position that in itself is characterized by a high state of anomie manifest through ethnic tensions, gang activities and even suicide. Following Portes and Rumbaut (2001), it can be seen that the second-generation Alevis started their journey of adolescence almost alone having detached themselves from both parental and societal regulative and integrative mechanisms, thereby making themselves vulnerable to risky choices such as dropping out of school and joining gangs, a risk other studies of ethnic gangs confirm (for example, Gemert et al., 2008; Bourgois 2003; Clarke et al., 2006; Willis 1997).

Whilst the gangs give access to illegitimate means to achieve culturally valued goals that are not possible to achieve through legitimate means, they also provide a sense of identity that integrates the individual into the group and which in a sense provides Durkheim's alternative regulation of youthful desires (one he assigned to the education system). Having no chance of attaining their material goals through participation in the mainstream labour market, as they lack the required resources, skills and qualifications, young Alevi's dependence on gangs appears inevitable for some given their rejection of the hard and boring work in the ethnic

labour market (cf. Portes & Zhou, 1993; Bourgois 2003; Clarke et.al. 2006). Some in an attempt to fulfil their dream of material wealth and status try to climb the ladder within the gang although only a few succeed and the consequences are not always positive with prison or even suicide for those who cannot cope with the pressures as an end result. For those who wish to leave suicide may appear to be the only form of escape while those who manage to leave end up in jobs they did not want in the ethnic labour market (Cetin, 2014).

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