

Group and intergroup parameters of gang activities:

An introduction and research agenda

Jane L. Wood¹ and Howard Giles²

¹University of Kent, UK

²University of California, Santa Barbara, USA

Corresponding author:

Dr. Jane L. Wood,
Centre of Research and Education in Forensic Psychology,
School of Psychology,
University of Kent, Canterbury, UK
CT2 7NP
E-Mail: J.L.Wood@kent.ac.uk

Abstract

In introducing this Special Issue on gangs, we overview the thrust of its papers, demonstrating how they assist in plugging research gaps from the dearth of psychological attention to gangs. The papers therein raise important theoretical considerations of group process effects, social identity, and communication influences in gangs. Also included are empirical examinations of how attitudes to formal organized crime groups may nurture pro-gang views, how social networks bridge gang divides, the de-humanization and social dominance association with gang membership, and how membership longevity associates with gang members' attitudes to their group. We conclude with theoretical prospects and empirical vistas for future work. For instance, vitality theory may help explain members' immersion in gangs, discursive strategies could explain how youth are enticed into gangs and examinations of community and law enforcement attitudes to gangs may provide insight into how oppositional attitudes are fostered on both sides of the gang divide.

Keywords

gangs; violence; group norms; social networks; criminality; dehumanization; honor

Gangs have a disproportionate impact on the communities around them, and their activities, such as drug trafficking and violence, dramatically and adversely affect many young people's and older neighbors' lives in many parts of the world, not only in terms of community life satisfaction, but with respect to violence and death. For instance, in the UK, gangs account for almost 50% of shootings, 22% of serious violence, and 20% of stabbings resulting in immeasurable human costs and financial costs to British health and justice systems that run into many millions of pounds each year (HM Government, 2011). In the USA, at the time of going to press, the effect of gang activity was no more evident than during the weekend of July 4, 2014, where 82 people were shot, and 14 killed in Chicago. One crime consultant for *CBS News* commented: "I think it is representative of the gang, drug, gun violence problem that still persists in Chicago.... It's not a law enforcement problem solely. There's not going to be a law enforcement solution to this. You can't arrest your way out of gang violence." (<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/report-82-shot-14-killed-in-chicago-4th-of-july-weekend-shootings/>).

The above demonstrates that there is a critical need to gain a deeper understanding about gangs. Yet, to date, a paucity of psychological research in the area leaves us at a standstill when contemplating the influence that gangs have on individual members. In his Preface to this Special Issue Malcolm Klein – a seminal criminologist in this research area – urges us to remember that gangs are groups and not just aggregations of individuals. This thought, in part, prompted our development of this Special Issue. That gangs are groups is undeniable, yet empirical examination of the group processes that lead aggregations of individuals to become one cohesive entity that employs social norms, communicates its existence and develops an oppositional culture, is rare. Klein notes how this oppositional culture leads gang members to reinterpret efforts to deter or to help as attempts at denigration.

But where does this reinterpretation originate - from oppositional individuals or from group norms that shape members' attitudes? Without a fuller understanding of gang group processes and how they inspire members' behavior we cannot *predict* intervention outcomes, which are currently seen only at the postmortem of our efforts. Klein asserts that group processes in gangs are stronger than anything we initiate to prevent, reduce, and deter gang membership; our resources are no match for a gang's group processes. Regardless of whether we address gang formation, gang prevention or gang intervention; group processes are vital and their importance trumps demographics, gender, structure, or levels of membership.

Nevertheless, a multi-national, multi-discipline, multi-method approach to studying gangs, as herein, offers promise that we can unravel and understand more about the group processes that are the lifeblood of gangs. But, in tandem, gang rivalries can be construed as intergroup communication *par excellence*. It is, therefore, surprising that very little work in the social psychology of intergroup relations, while examining a plethora of other intergroup settings, has been devoted to this topic. With Hogg and Tindale (2005), we recognize the significant interrelationships between group dynamics and intergroup processes (e.g., the emergence and change of leaders as a function of prevailing intergroup situation) and the relevance of this particular journal to examine between- and within-group issues in the hitherto under-explored realm of gangs. In terms of what we do know from other disciplines, Wood and Alleyne (2010) contend that "...our knowledge on gangs is still limited and rather muddy" (p. 100).

The papers included in this Special Issue have been brought together to reflect some of the gang research that considers group and intergroup processes in gangs. In the first paper, Wood takes a social psychological perspective to consider some of the vast array of potential group processes that may be at work in a gang. The paper examines how these

group processes may work to influence individual gang members' cognitions, attitudes and behavior and argues that group processes need more specific attention if we are to develop effective interventions to reduce gangs. In the second paper, Bolden uses a social network paradigm to examine the intergroup relationship dynamics of gang members in emerging and chronic gang cities. Bolden's findings challenge common assumptions that gang members seldom interact with rivals unless it is with violence. Based on in-depth interviews, Bolden reveals that individuals' outgroup ties with non-affiliated and even arch-rival gangs are common and that family members, business enterprises, romantic interests, and even friendships facilitate these ties.

In contrast to Bolden's paper, the third shows how gang members use the social-cognitive strategy of de-humanizing rivals to justify violence against them. Alleyne, Fernandes, and Pritchard reveal the importance of moral disengagement strategies in gang membership – particularly de-humanization tactics. The authors note how de-humanizing victims facilitates gang member violence, especially in formally structured groups that have a committed and cohesive membership and a collective identity that the group communicates to outgroups. In paper number four, Densley, Cai, and Hilal examine the potential of social dominance orientation (SDO) to explain intergang conflict. The authors report that core gang members have higher SDO and lower trust propensity than do peripheral gang members – and this is regardless of time spent with the gang. The authors contend that SDO and associated attitudes and behaviors in gang members are likely to be nurtured and reinforced via group processes, and that further work examining this relatively new area of gang research is vital for us to understand more of the role that SDO takes in a gang context.

The fifth paper in this Special Issue focuses on gang membership in a prison setting. Examining young offenders, Scott reports that although young offenders involved in institutional gangs have higher levels of aggressive and violent attitudes than nongang

offenders, these levels reduce with length of time the youth are involved in the gang. Scott suggests that these findings are important for prison policies and treatment programs both of which should consider duration of group membership as an important factor when targeting interventions at gang members. The next paper in this Special Issue takes a broader perspective on criminal groups, going beyond street gangs to larger entities such as the Mafia to consider how cultures that foster codes of honor and masculinity may facilitate the recruitment of young people into criminal organizations and gangs. Travaglino, Abrams, Randsley de Moura, and Russo examined young Italians' attitudes towards criminal organizations. Their findings show that holding positive attitudes towards criminal organizations and having low levels of vicarious shame regarding the activities of those criminal organizations mean that youth are less likely to take an anti-Mafia stance. The authors suggest that cultures that ideologically emphasize the importance of honor and masculinity may foster positive attitudes towards gangs that also endorse these ideologies.

Our final paper in this Special Issue offers a theoretical perspective on gangs by considering the roles that social identity and identity-related communication take in promoting gang membership among youth who seek a familial sense of belonging from their group membership. Goldman, Giles, and Hogg consider the messages communicated by gang members as an identity construction, projection and management process in a gang's dynamics (see also, Woo, Giles, Hogg, & Goldman, in press). The authors argue that the social psychological underpinnings of gang membership need greater attention so that we can identify the role that group processes play in gang membership more specifically.

Moving beyond the Special Issue

An important aim in compiling this volume of work is to encourage future empirical research and theoretical thinking about intragroup and intergroup processes as well as communication

practices of gangs; regarding the latter, one of the violent incidents in the aforementioned Chicago weekend arose after a gang sign was thrown. Obviously, the papers in this volume already present a diverse range of topic areas that would most certainly benefit from further sustained research. For example, Bolden's research encourages connections with recent work on the social psychology of networks (e.g., Westaby, Pfaff, & Redding, 2014). In addition, many facets of the contributions herein could be incorporated into Wood and Alleyne's (2010) unified model which provides a framework for understanding the processes leading *to* as well as *from* gang membership. Space and parsimony precludes a full exposition of this comprehensive position but, suffice it to say, that work in this Special Issue could further elaborate on some of the main constructs and issues schematically highlighted in it. For instance, social dominance orientation (Densley et al.), length of time in a gang (Scott), social networks (Bolden), dehumanization (Alleyne et al.), honor (Travaglino et al.), and group norms (Wood) could, arguably, flesh out the following components of the model affecting criminal activity and the opportunity for criminal learning, namely and respectively, individual characteristics, social factors, environment, social cognition, selection of peers, and opportunity for criminal learning.

However, many exciting prospects are on the horizon which could broaden this model yet further, and we propose just three potent directions with the flavor of some attending questions here. First, the nature of the intergroup relations operating vis-s-vis opposing relevant gangs and other parties such as law enforcement and associated social identities need creative framing in any formal attempt to elaborate the model (Goldman et al.). Relatedly, the intergroup concept of (objective and subjective) **group vitalities** (which has a substantial history and received a lot of attention in the multicultural literature) could be a predictive concept here (e.g., Abrams, Barker, & Giles, 2009; Giles, Bourhis, & Taylor, 1977). Vitality refers to how much a group has created, maintained and/or defended relative social

advantages in terms of pride in their history, sheer numbers of its members, and the visibility of its culture and communicative mechanisms in the important layers of society, such as in the media, via music, and on the internet. This is multidimensionally-evident in one of our local Eastside gangs in Santa Barbara, California, marking their territory with elaborate graffiti, diluting and tagging the boundaries of the outgroup's professed terrain, having their distinctive rap performed cross-generationally on the steps of the cultural center of the city on a website, and killing significant members of the outgroup and, thereby reducing the latter's numbers. These then are a clear set of messages about the high relative vitality this gang holds in terms of status, demography, and institutional support over the Westsiders. One of the means of deciding whether one's ingroup has a positive identity and will flourish is to compare the group's characteristics along these vitality dimensions with that of the outgroup. Vitality theory contends that the higher one's ingroup vitality, the more gang members would be willing to loyally and with pride invest in their ingroup emotionally, psychologically, and through collective (oftentimes criminal) actions. Intergroup theories also indicate – in ways not readily appreciated by law enforcement and society – that taking out and imprisoning large numbers of a more violent gang has certain social consequences, including and not limited to not only empowering those left behind over time, but also and immediately increases the vitality of the other gang(s).

Second, Wood and Alleyne's model, as above, articulates some of the social, familial, and personal factors that lead youth to join gangs and does have commerce with the desistance process (that is, how, when and why members leave a gang). However, and with youth being enticed to gang membership at earlier and earlier years in life, it seems important to explore the communicative ingredients and dynamics of the recruitment process whilst acknowledging that sometimes youth join gangs completely of their own volition without persuasion or coercion (Bliss-Holz, 2001). In other words, we need to know more about the

explicit (and doubtless also subtle) discourse of how youth are enticed, cajoled, or appealed to by recruiters: is it accommodative to their social and personal needs, or is more nonaccommodating and threatening, or even both? What discursive strategies are successful in not complying for those who are resilient and standing their ground and what, if any, additional tactics do recruiters continue to engage? Or even, do recruiters not need to do anything to entice new members in to the gang?

Third, the Wood and Alleyne model is, arguably, one side of the coin, and it would be important to garner lay attitudes from the community (including those in law enforcement, school counseling, and city/county officials) towards gang identities, culture (if it is recognized), and activities (see Swetman & Pope, 2001). What is the extent of lay knowledge of and social attributions expressed about the origins of gang membership, and how does (old and new) media play roles in this? In parallel, what is the affect and empathy associated with gang membership for ordinary citizens, and do these fuel anti-immigration sentiments and prejudices when gangs consist of mainly ethnic minorities (e.g., as in the USA)? Is de-humanization apparent on this side of the coin, too? How does this impact and shape community views and proposed policies about what can and should be done to intervene? Some urban communities in the USA are in prolonged legal and public contests regarding the pros and cons of gang injunctions, with charges of racism oftentimes levied against those in support of them. Such consequences are not yet apparent in the UK, but this is not to say they will not develop.

Clearly, there are many facets to the hugely complex picture of understanding gang issues and sociological, psychological, and communicative questions raised above are important for us to deliver on. Hopefully, this Special Issue will promote an interest in these group and intergroup issues from different theoretical and methodological traditions and, in due course, we will determine whether models of the ilk of Wood and Alleyne can be

effectively deepened and broadened, or whether we need a further series of mini-models - three just in terms of future concerns articulated above – to successfully address them.

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