

Chapter 2

The Gang as a Network

Everything went through him [leader]. He controlled 'x' many people who only knew 'x' many people, whereas he [leader] was the key because he knows the whole thing [network]

While the dimensions of fluidity and mobility were first exhibited in the North American context years ago by ethnic-Vietnamese criminal organizations (Vigil and Yun 1990), they are no longer exclusive to them alone. Actually, what they exhibited over two decades ago has been increasingly adopted by other criminal enterprises, who have realized it advantageous to align their operational structure with their commodity flow. And, as “new-age” gangs continue to adopt a network structure that facilitates fluidity among participants and geographic mobility—and by so doing become a source of media attention and law enforcement vexation—it is anticipated that an awareness of social formations borne of necessity and shaped by cultural antecedents, will become increasingly essential.

Social Network Models

In order to secure analytical purchase of social formations, networks represent an empirically grounded model of social structure that grew out of an increasing awareness that spatial boundaries do not delimit social boundaries. The primary objective of analyzing an individual's social network then, is to be able to move beyond the constraints and boundaries imposed by a spatial locale. In short, the social environment that characterizes the urban context is best conceived of as the network of actual social relationships maintained, regardless of whether these are confined to a specific area or extend well beyond its boundaries (Bott 1955).

Social network analysis adopts an ego-centred perspective that focuses on how individuals are connected to others, and recognizes—that for most people—there is no single group that encapsulates their daily activities.

Interview with a former gang player who is referencing the street gang leader he followed.

The approach taken in this text will focus on the network as a process for the mobilization of action, rather than on the quantification of network characteristics; the latter representing a sociometric path that has emerged since the origins of network analysis in ethnography, and which some suggest “directs attention exclusively to the overall structure of network ties while suppressing consideration of their substantive content” (Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994, p. 1440). As a paradigm from which explanations surrounding social action can be extracted from patterns of relationships, network analysis dismisses explanations of “social behaviour as the result of individuals’ common possession of attributes and norms rather than as a result of their involvement in structured social relations” (Wellman 1983, p. 165). In other words, if we are to account for how individuals come together for a common objective, it is essential that we look beyond the potentially shared attributes of age, gender, religion, social status, or ethnicity, and focus on the network of relationships within which they exist.

Unlike the long-standing occidental gang paradigm (see Fig. 1.1), new-age street gangs are not geographically anchored to an area; rather they are most often characterized by their extraordinary mobility and fluidity of gang composition. The mobility which characterizes their activities has tended to produce loose-knit networks which show little redundancy or overlap in connectedness among the network links. This has served to create a network of gang players where mediating links are of critical importance in determining gang structure and organization. To accomplish the examination of a network then, one cannot merely propose to indicate the links between people, as this is adequately described by the word “relationship”. Rather, it is necessary to document further linkages to the links themselves or risk failing to account for much of the social context within which decisions are made. Accomplishing this requires reference to contextual social network models which provide a framework for analyzing associations between individuals, and that flow from established relationships. Broadly speaking, these network models can be generalized into three approaches; each of them uniquely emphasizing Boissevain’s “friends of friends” typology that embodies the element of trust, so critical to the survival of new-age gangs.

In order to describe phenomenon shared by new-age gang players and informants over the course of an extended period of research, I have borrowed models from social network analysis. Each of the analytic models that follow distinguishes between patterns of social relationships that allow us to differentiate between enduring association and objective-activated joint activity. The coalitions model describes new-age gang formation and mobilization; the network-set model describes the potential for rival gangs to be created; and the action-set model provides a prototype for how action-set participants are recruited.

The Network-Set Model¹

In this model, social relationships exist in an unbounded network of ego-centred “sets” that lack either leadership or a coordinating organization. Any person is believed to have relations with a number of people, who in turn are linked to others; however, the prevailing characteristic of association to the network requires that members share an underlying bond such as kinship, economics, or a ‘community of interest’. The set is ego-centred in that it is focused on an individual, and consists of the people classified by ego according to a specific criterion. Following through on the kinship analogy, kinship linkages would represent the network, and all those classified as “brothers” would form the set. These people therefore form only part of the network—that part which ego recognizes as being contained in the set in some specifiable context. Barnes conceives of the network as being the basis for sets, rather than as a means of describing them. It is this intrinsic ability to view the network as a constellation of sets built on dyadic relationships, that in turn allows us to conceive of it as a reservoir of ego-centred networks each equally possessing the ability to structure and rival existing or prevailing ego-centred networks that have already established a coordinating leadership.

The Action-Set Model²

A related way in which personal networks have been conceived has been characterized as the “action-set” model. Under this paradigm, a certain number of linkages which already exist in the total network of a ‘community of interest’ may be mobilized for a specific and limited purpose. This type of network is called the action-set, and its mobilization implies some transaction between an “ego” or reference point, and the persons in the action-set. The individuals mobilized in an action-set may be activated through a sequence of leader-centred connections, or they may be recruited directly by the street gang leader through a dyadic relationship. An action-set therefore, is delineated in terms of the specific transaction which brings it into being, making the mobilization of individuals in this position contingent on the activation of the gang player through whom they were contacted. When individuals in the action-set exist through a series of contexts of activity, without any formal basis for membership, they are best conceived of as “quasi-groups” that represent a pool of potential gang players or recruits who represent “aggregates or portions of the community which have no recognizable

¹ The network-set model presented here was first proposed by Barnes (1972).

² The term action-set was first attributed to Van Velzen (1971), however, it is being applied in this text consistent with Mayer’s (1978) typology which focuses on its activation.

structure, but whose members have certain interests or modes of behaviour in common, which may at any time lead them to form themselves into definite groups” (Ginsberg 1934, p. 40). This group would be somewhat analogous to what authors have described as “youth groups”: small clusters of youth who “hang out” together in public places (Gordon 2000).

The Coalitions Model³

The coalitions model views members of ego’s personal network who are preferentially mobilized for a specific purpose or goal-oriented criminal activity, as coalitions. In contrast to the action-set model, this model conceives of coalitions as existing only until the goal is attained, at which time the members of the coalition cease to be linked by a common pattern of action and re-enter the category of ego’s personal network of potential players. The parties to the coalition retain their unique individual identity which is not replaced by a group identity, nor are their individual commitments subsumed to a uniform and group-focused set of expectations. The coalition can be thought of as a consciously constructed social entity in the sense that the linkages activated and maintained within the group have an ego-centred leader. This leader-centred social network has been conceived of in the literature as an “interest coalition” (Van Velzen 1971) because it is brought into being by that leader to satisfy a specific undertaking. As such, mobilization can be conceived of as a series of transactional linkages between a leader and his followers; followers who are not necessarily connected or known to one another. Police intelligence reports have referred to this type of structure as “cells”, noting that “a cell-based structure does not mean that there are no leaders within the group” (CISC 2005, p. 6). I would argue that the cells being referenced by law enforcement are actually a combination of two phenomena: independent coalitions with an identifiable street gang leader and, a “mix and match” configuration of gang players within an individual coalition as preferentially mobilized through the street gang leader. It is worthy of note that the coalitions model is not inconsistent with Barnes’s network-set model; indeed coalition members are drawn from sets within ego’s personal network. The difference is realized when one of the ego-centred networks preferentially mobilizes members from within their larger network of relations for an indeterminate period of time, at which point we can allow our terminology to reflect this change in structure and use the term “coalition”. A coalition has a mobilizing and coordinating leadership that draws on network-sets.

³ The coalitions model presented here was first proposed by Boissevain (1971).

“New-Age” Gang Networks

As each of the above models suggest, one cannot totally separate personal, social, and goal-oriented activities when seeking to establish a network of trusted associates. All possible and potentially relevant social dimensions have to be considered, which necessitates a shift in focus from individual gang ‘players’ to networks of relationships.

The unit of analysis critical to analyzing new-age gang structure is the nature of the relationship. All of the models presented focus on ego-centred relationships that have been brought about by a pattern of interaction that reflects what has been described as the “live, work, or play” site (Brantingham and Brantingham 1993): kinship ties, “friends of friends”, employment, community-of-interest participation, or communication links activated through these associations. While these relationship-based network models serve to illuminate patterns of association that may exist, it is worth emphasizing that personal attributes such as sex, age, language, and ethnicity—while perhaps shared by those in the relationship—do not form the basis of that relationship (Prowse 1993). This observation will be discussed to a greater extent in Chap. 5.

The fluid dimension of gang players in an ever-increasingly connected world, reinforces what each of the included models emphasizes: primacy rests within a plurality of relationships that occur across ego-centred networks. A network ‘anchored’ around a particular member of the group can be conceived of as ego-centred because it represents social relationships of all kinds. Partial networks based on relationships borne of kinship obligations, work or school relationships, or friendship ties, are activated from the leader’s ego-centred network and are focused around particular types of activities. As such, social relationships based on ascriptive characteristics such as age, sex, language, ethnicity, cannot be separated from economic pursuits. The strength of the commitment to the activity then—criminal or otherwise—tends to be influenced by the multiplexity of the relationship: those based on a number of commonalities are stronger because they exist across different venues of intersection such as those represented by the “live, work, or play” paradigm; an observation made many years earlier by the Manchester school of network theorists (Gluckman 1967).

Relationships based on social solidarity and diffuse obligations are structured by a history of interaction between the members of an ego-centred network, however because networks facilitate function, it should not be assumed that they are devoid of the search for individual advantage. From the standpoint of a gang leader about to activate elements of his network, he needs to know whether those he activates can be trusted, since even kin-based networks can be characterized by diffuse solidarity and moral obligation. As such, they are no less susceptible to the pursuit of individual advantage than any others (Stack 1974). A leader’s security is not ensured by a loyalty commitment from his players, but rather his security is assured by the effectiveness of the network in ensuring the desired objective is attained.

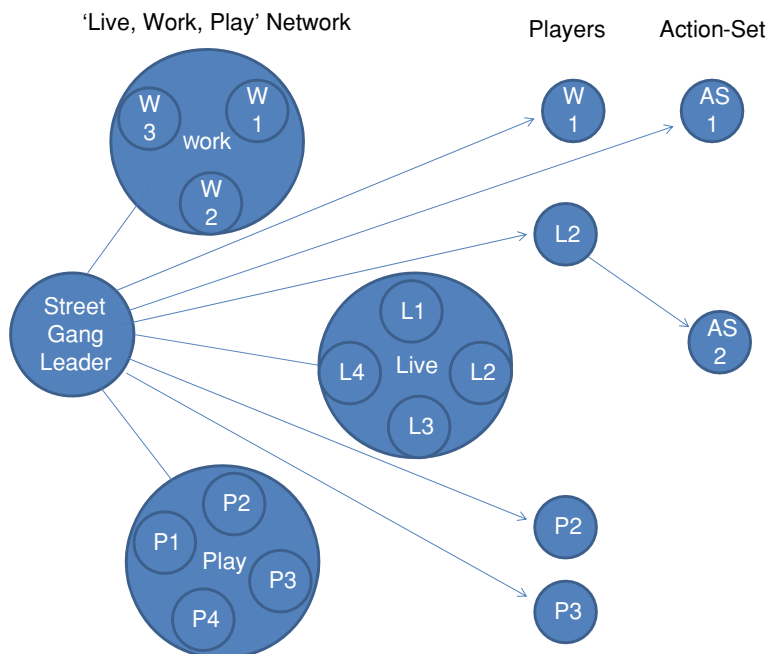


Fig. 2.1 Leader-centred network of potential gang "players"

In urban settings in particular, where relationships are specially developed based on points of articulation that cluster around where one lives, has commitments, or associates, personal relationships arising from these sites are frequently single-stranded and often rarely endure past the interaction that brought them into being. By contrast, multi-stranded relationships drawn from network-sets that include kinship, can extend the geographic range of ego's network, and endure independently past the cessation of a particular criminal undertaking. This observation has been termed "labour market kinship" (Harris 1990); a diminishing phenomenon long-associated with the modernity of early-industrial societies, and one which has become increasingly foreign in today's postmodern Western society. However, as theorists have argued, not all aspects of today's industrial-based societies conform to modernity nor do all facets of contemporary societies conform to post-modernism (Harris 1990). In short, while gang players are drawn from a street gang leader's personal network, it is important to clarify that while the interplay between his personal network and economic pursuits may become a characteristic of each, they are not the defining characteristic. Specific personal relationships that utilize kinship may be used to further economics, and specific economic relationships may be furthered on the basis of personal ties, but each of these occurs as a result of pre-existing relationships formed in distinct spheres of interaction. Relationships arising out of established kinship ties, shared experience, and established migration and/or trade patterns, collectively comprise associations

in space as otherwise described as “global ethnoscapes” (Appadurai 2000). The mobilization of these connections occurs then, in the context of both moral economies necessitating financial obligation to family in the form of remittances and/or social economies to satisfy personal benefit and economic “tributes”. In short, the application of social network analysis provides an opportunity to see new-age gang players—and in particular the leader position—as ethnographic subjects of study within the context of transactional linkages preferentially activated and mobilized to satisfy perceived need and/or want. By so doing, the definition of “new-age” street gangs put forward in this text reflects a paradigm shift from definitions currently in use; this author proposes that rather than focusing on the characteristics of the group collective to define a “gang”,⁴ perhaps the time has come to focus on the characteristics of a leader-centred relationship-based network of gang “players” (Fig. 2.1).

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⁴ The characteristics being referenced would be consistent with what Klein et al. (2006) have termed gang “definers”.

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