

Preface

The introduction to the research findings that follow anticipates a number of questions fundamental to social analysis. Is it possible for a police officer / anthropologist / researcher who symbolized the “mainstream”, to forge a trust with those who were indubitably gang “players”? How can an interviewer ever be sure how their questions are being understood by their informants: What did *you* think you thought you heard me ask? Is it possible to determine how gang leaders make their decisions concerning their following? How might have my profession as a police officer and my initial points of entry to my informants have influenced what became a protracted anthropological field study? And, how did I, as a researcher, ensure that my methods of making sense of the data did not interfere with the meanings provided by informants as part of their everyday interpretation of their activities?

My interest in gangs was awakened in the early 1990s in Calgary, Alberta, Canada where, while working as a police officer, Calgary sustained two unprecedented large-scale jewelry heists within an 8-month period. And, while this in itself would not necessarily be considered noteworthy in a large urban setting, what was particularly troubling about these armed robberies was that they were accomplished with precision timing, attracted little witness attention despite having occurred midday in the city centre, and then remained unsolved for a period of time as investigators searched for similar cases across the country that might lend insight into who might be responsible. While many in the policing community were convinced that these robberies were merely *ad hoc*—albeit very successful—others, including myself, were troubled by just how well orchestrated they were. And, while this author concedes that there can be *ad hoc* or spontaneous crimes, they are not usually this well executed at the group level; group-focused efforts generally require preplanning, patterned communication, and the ability to coordinate the liquidation of the proceeds of the crime so that all know they will share in the profits. The complete scenario is outlined in [Chap. 1](#); my intention here is only to situate this experience within the context of the research that followed.

My formal research into the structure and organization of “new-age” street gangs began when I pursued graduate study in the early 1990s and my laboratory

became the Southern Ontario corridor; a research site that was selected as a result of continuing police investigation into the armed robberies previously described, and that would ultimately be solved in that jurisdiction as a result of a gang-related triple homicide. Little did I realize at the time, that this research would continue for many years thereafter in other Canadian-based venues; frequently on an intermittent basis pursuant to new avenues of research in need of pursuit, or oftentimes determined by the availability of new informants; some now having been released from incarceration and introduced to me through “friends of friends”. While many of the informants consulted during this extended period of research were indubitably gang players or organized crime affiliated elements, just as many were community-of-interest members, victims, and law enforcement investigators. My interviews were conducted in very different venues and contingent on a variety of factors, which heavily influenced how the research would proceed. These variables included, but were not limited exclusively to, informant availability, comfort levels, issues of personal safety, and sometimes just the convenience of those involved. Some interviews were conducted within the correctional system with both gang informants and players awaiting trial, while other interviews were with those who were already sentenced through the courts and were now serving prison time. In the correctional institutional setting in particular, there exists little doubt in my mind that being of the female gender was of immense advantage. Those I requested interviews with—both inside the correctional system and later on the outside—appeared to be much more likely to speak with me when advised that I was female; perhaps because of a gender dynamic, but also because of their being very conscious of perceptions among their peers. As explained by one of the incarcerated informants I spoke with, he was willing to talk to me because I was female and “It’s not like I’m talking to the police”. After having made introductions through the proper access channels and having asked to speak with this informant for a book I was writing—at that time a Master’s thesis—this informant later explained to me that most of the other inmates would think I was his probation/parole worker or a social worker liaising between him and his family on the outside. Gender indeed proved to be an immeasurable advantage, particularly as it pertained to my ability to make notes for clarification and for the purposes of follow-up visitation.

The Ethnographic Process

The findings contained in this study represent the culmination of intensive interviews with informants over a period of time that spanned 15 years; both during my career as a police officer and later after I had left the profession. At times over the protracted course of this research, I occupied the seemingly conflicting positions of anthropologist, researcher, and police officer; a multi-role pursuit that provided me with the opportunity to earn the trust of informants from very diverse backgrounds. While academic ethics precluded my ability to conduct formal research while

simultaneously occupying my role as a police officer, my police investigative experience certainly helped to inform and structure future interview opportunities that I would later pursue in the lone capacity of an academic researcher, intimately familiar with policing. The research favored an unstructured interview approach that “cast the net wide” and proceeded based on the responses received from those being interviewed. This interview style was chosen for two reasons: First, it partially corrected for issues of intercultural communication by allowing me to assess what informants thought they heard me ask, and second, when no answer was forthcoming, it provided an opportunity to take a closer look at why a particular question might not have been answered. In other words, what informants chose not to answer carried with it its own potential for further investigation; particularly when others similarly connected to some aspect of gang activity, proved equally as reluctant to speak about an issue. My questions were selected in the general domain of what brought me to the informant with whom I was speaking: their identification as a gang player, a gang associate, a gang victim, a gang investigator, and others. These questions then provided a starting point for what, in many cases, would become thematic interviews over time. Because of the unstructured interview strategy I used, I suppose it could be said that I never formally interviewed anyone during this extended period of research. I began with open-ended questions and the informants’ answers formed the basis of follow-up questions and ensuing conversation. In some instances, I taped what informants related to me, but only with their permission and only when I asked them to explain, from their perspective, specific situations or apparent contradictions in what others had shared. This particular strategy was limited to those I came to know well or for those whose insights into gang life were already well established through police investigations and the courts. This approach provided a check against my own observations and field notes, and provided me with an opportunity to follow-up with informants on areas of perceived contradiction or in need of elaboration. As I proceeded over the course of many interviews with gang participants in particular, I was always reminded of an observation made almost a half-century ago, as it pertained to researchers seeking to explain a social order while reconciling the constructs used by informants with models used by outsiders:

The scientific observer must take into account the common-sense constructs employed by the actor in everyday life if he is to grasp the meanings that will be assigned by the actor to his questions, regardless of the form in which they are presented to the actor (Cicourel 1964, p. 61).

Methodology

The methodology pursued during the times I “stepped out” of active policing for the purposes of this research, also utilized the long-standing ethnographic technique of participant observation, wherein I witnessed *in situ* instances of protection extortions and police “take downs” of suspected gang players. At other times,

I found myself engaged in participatory action research with community stakeholders, specifically those on the receiving end of protection and extortion rackets. And while much of this research was conducted during my career as a police officer, my informant interviews were done exclusively outside my policing jurisdiction, until such time as I left the policing profession for good. When I closed my policing career of 25 years, only then did I speak with gang informants from within my former policing jurisdiction; many now introduced by community members with whom I had liaised for many years prior. The rapport that had been established with these community conduits could now be best described as occurring between two interested stakeholders both looking to disrupt and forestall future gang violence: one entity participating from the perspective of building community awareness and capacity, and myself grappling to understand the structure and organization of twenty-first century street gangs which were increasingly morphing into both fluid and mobile criminal enterprise.

As a researcher engaged in an ethnographic pursuit informed by the divergent perspectives of police officer and anthropologist, I embarked on two additional anthropological traditions while conducting this protracted undertaking: The methodological pursuit of situational analysis, and the methodological/theoretical paradigm of social network analysis. Interviews conducted with gang informants about specific gang activities were particularly well served by situational analysis; a technique that provided an opportunity to examine past social interactions among gang players as a dynamic process of decision-making at the level of street gang leaders. Within a plurality of relations, street gang leaders made decisions concerning what social network links to activate, what links to respond to, and what links would remain dormant. During this decision making process, they shared with this researcher both the sources and destinations of their information flow and described how they safeguarded against any constraints that might impact on that information flow among those they preferentially activated.

The methodological and theoretical paradigm of social network analysis was found to be particularly well suited to the urban context, where it is acknowledged that for most individuals, no single group encapsulates all of one's activities. Rather, fields of interaction are seen to arise from where the actor-centred referent—in my research street gang leaders—lived, worked, or played. The social network models included for discussion in this study represent those that most closely approximate the explanations and insights provided by those who were known street gang leaders, players, and, in one instance, a high-ranking organized crime figure. The rationale for selecting these models was provided by embarking on multi-sited and multi-timed informant interviews which both identified and supported their use.

In sum, what follows is information shared by informants during an interview process that spanned two decades—supported by police investigative findings and insights and corroborated by community of interest members and other victim

stakeholders—that have collectively informed the definitions of “new-age” gangs, organized crime, and the “action-set”, proposed by this author.

It has been said that “It is the wearer of the shoe that knows best where it pinches.”¹

The personal interview communications that have been selected for inclusion within this text depict, in my mind, the common-sense approach to gang activity shared by informants; both those who have either worn or felt the imprint of gang “shoes”, and those who, to a lesser or greater extent, came to experience where gang life ultimately “pinched”.

Reference

Cicourel, A. V. (1964). *Method and Measurement in Sociology*. New York: The Free Press.

¹ English proverb or adage of ambiguous authorship.



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