

GETTIN' RIGHT WITH HUMPTY: OR HOW SOCIOLOGISTS PROPOSE TO BREAK UP GANGS, PATCH BROKEN COMMUNITIES, AND MAKE SCARY CHILDREN INTO CONVENTIONAL ADULTS

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ABSTRACT

A critical reappraisal of the social scientific literature on gang research and intervention strategies finds the social disorganization paradigm employed by most experts in the field sorely wanting. Its central problem is that it severely undervalues or dismisses altogether the viability of the civil society in those communities where gangs have emerged. Based on this premise, experts end up predicting that gangs will appear anywhere and are content to recommend intervention strategies that do not work and further erode the capacity of local groups to respond to their gang problems. An alternative perspective on youth culture and gangs in communities is offered based on a stronger view of civil society and the capacity of communities to integrate young persons into a grown-up world.

INTRODUCTION

Popular and scientific curiosity about gangs spiked in the last two decades. It is not surprising that sociologists, who have studied gangs since the 1920s, rushed to satisfy the demand for information about these groups. The large and varied body of literature they produced is not easy to summarize. Major findings about the organization and behavior of gangs often are inconclusive and sometimes contradictory. Pieces of evidence can be interpreted differently, depending on one's theoretical prejudices and reformist leanings, and arguments are to be had about everything from the proper method to study gangs right up to the relation between local gangs and national drug dealing syndicates. We even continue to disagree about the best way to define what a gang is (Klein 1995; Spergel 1995).

On two surprising points, however, there appears to be some consensus. We think that a general explanation or theory about gangs is within our grasp. (It all has something to do with "social disorganization".) We also are pretty certain about what needs to be done to control gangs. (You have to shut off the supply of members or break up the groups.) We come to these points by way of different paths, but our research and reform programs lead us to these general conclusions.

This concordance in a field otherwise riddled with disagreements and competing schools of thought can be tied to a convenient marriage of science to reform that has characterized our treatment of gangs this century (Klein 1995). The particular mix of activism and expertise we favor introduces a variety of social services to communities with gangs and many types of counseling and training to actual or would-be gang members (Goldstein, Huff 1993). At other times the gang itself is the

object of these intervention strategies. Our goal, in any case, is to weaken gangs or to minimize their impact on the communities where they were found.

Unfortunately, gang prevention and reform programs, as Malcolm Klein (1995) refers to them, have not enjoyed much success. This fact notwithstanding, Irving Spergel notes,

there has been a significant expansion of resources to local human service agencies to address the spreading and worsening gang violence problem in the 1980s and 1990s (1995)

That these efforts would go forward despite questions about "how different or innovative the newer programs really are compared with traditional programs" ought to have alarmed more persons than it did.

The poor record of these programs has not gone completely unnoticed, of course. It contributed to the growing popularity of gang suppression programs initiated by law enforcement officials during the past decade (Klein 1995). The objective of these programs has been to disrupt gangs and to interfere with their criminal activities in an aggressive manner. Police departments and the courts that undertook gang suppression programs scored some victories along the way and incarcerated many gang members.

Regrettably, gang suppression programs carry a big risk with them. They can make the gang problem in a community worse. Inasmuch as youth gangs take some measure of strength from the reactions of local officials and community residents, suppression might well produce "more gang cohesiveness, more gangs, (and) more gang violence" (Klein 1995). There is evidence to back up this claim. Federal, state, and local efforts to get tough with

gangs in recent years occurred even as the number of youth gangs was growing dramatically and the groups were appearing in places where they had not been before. If these strategies were intended to discourage young persons from joining gangs or acting violently, it did not work. We can feel no better about the prospects for gang suppression strategies than we do about the track record of gang prevention and reform programs that more liberal persons favor.

In the face of these failures, Malcolm Klein (1995) proposes that we shift our attention away from places like Los Angeles and Chicago where "it may be too late" to control gangs and concentrate instead on "smaller, emergent gang cities." Once these places have been chosen, states and federal agencies will be called upon to provide

jobs, better schools, social services, health programs, family support, training in community organization skills, and support for resident empowerment. (1995)

This is necessary, Klein (1995) believes, because "gangs are by-products of incapacitated communities" which need a great deal of help before they can accomplish anything. In short, we need to do more of what didn't work before.

Communities may have a bigger role to play this time around. They would provide the organizational muscle and leadership that puts all of the state and federal resources to good use. Some cities already have witnessed the birth of community coalitions consisting of "law enforcement officials, social service providers, and other... groups." Together they are "developing community-based strategies that take into account the complex nature of street gangs" (National Institute of Justice 1993). Such collaborative efforts may be overdue, but it is not clear that new attempts to mobilize communities against gangs will prove any more successful than earlier attempts by outside agencies to mount programs with their professional staffs. Nor is it apparent that persons from the neighborhoods where programs are initiated would be in any more control of the new initiatives than they were of the old ones (Klein 1995; Spergel 1995).

In truth, we are not likely to do more of what did not work before. Yet the feeling to do so is strong and widely held. The liberal impulses of sociologists and many other persons

would encourage them to intervene, even if they were not certain of how much good new programs would do. Furthermore, social scientists are more likely to benefit than not from government spending on social programs dedicated to persons and places involved with gangs.

However accurate these observations may be, something more, or maybe something less, than the politics of doing well by doing good is at work in the sociological agenda for protecting the world from gangs. We simply may not know what else to do. We tinker with established canon and reform packages but never abandon them because we have nothing with which to replace them.

SOCIAL DISORGANIZATION AND GANGS

Central to their thinking about gangs and reform packages is the concept of "social disorganization." Scientists, not surprisingly, disagree about the term's precise meaning and how best to apply it in their studies of gangs. At a minimum the term implies that parts of a society have broken down (Tilly, Tilly, Tilly 1975). These parts can be institutions, communities or sets of beliefs, or even individual persons; but they are to varying degrees, either alone or in combination, broken.

The problem is that scientists usually have no direct way of measuring this breakdown. They look instead to certain features of populations that live in areas that have gangs. These variables frequently include the number or percentage of poor or minority persons in the area and/or the amount of movement in and out of the community (Bursik, Grasmick 1995; Esbensen, Huizinga, Weiher 1993). An area with a larger share of minority or poor persons or showing a great deal of movement in its population is assumed to be disorganized. Alternatively, the breakdown is discovered in answers given by these persons to questions posed by survey researchers or in official records showing how many crimes they commit or pathological states they share.

The breaking down, whether measured or not, can take place in one or two ways. It can occur at the level of cultural beliefs and values, or it can be at the level of routine social and organizational life. The former is manifested as a falling apart in our understanding about what is important or as the inability to reconcile competing views of right and wrong. The latter

involves disruptions in customary ways of acting alone or in groups or it shows up as the inability to reconcile different ways of making groups and working through groups.

Sociologists have developed explanations for gangs and about deviant behavior that generally focus on the breakdown of cultural beliefs and values or the disruption of social routines and organizations (Hirschi 1969; Kornhauser 1978). Clear as these distinctions may be in principle, it is hard to keep ideas about social structure from sneaking into discussions about values and beliefs because our understanding of the world and of matters related to right and wrong are tied to the way we have made a society and act in it. In a similar way, descriptions or explanations of gang behavior that focus on a breakdown in social roles and institutions can call forth ideas regarding what persons think and believe about the right and wrong way to do things.

Evidence acquired by social scientists who have studied many aspects of delinquency and gang behavior appears to favor social or structural explanations for these problems (Hirschi 1969; Kornhauser 1978). A breakdown in groups and institutions is thought to be more important in accounting for this behavior than is any confusion we might have about our values and beliefs. Nevertheless, much academic writing about gangs still refers to the culture of gangs and places with gangs or the values and attitudes that distinguish gang members from persons who do not join gangs (Esbensen et al 1993; Klein 1995; Spergel 1995). When we talk about "social disorganization" in relation to gangs, we usually harbor ideas about both a breakdown in the way persons believe or think about the world *and* a disruption in the way persons or groups act toward each other. When we propose to do something about gangs we usually do it with the intention of making persons whole or putting communities back together.

Unfortunately, we know that gang prevention, reform, and suppression strategies have not produced the results expected of them. More gangs are forming. Gangs have not bent in response to attempts to "reform" them, and the police and courts have not been able to suppress them. The failure of virtually all traditional gang intervention strategies to make much of a difference for very long should be treated more seriously than it is. In fact, it could be viewed as a rather detailed test of social scientists' favorite theory about the

origins and conduct of gangs.

Something called "social disorganization" is held to account for the presence and behavior of gangs. It also is the primary rationale behind most conventional gang intervention strategies. Insofar as the strategies do not work it seems fair to conclude that ideas about social disorganization probably cannot help us to understand much about the origins and conduct of gangs. There must be some other explanation for the emergence, persistence, and behavior of gangs.

Resistance to this conclusion will be strong and broadly based. It could not be otherwise. After all, a whole research tradition and reform industry have been built up around the idea that gangs are a by-product of broken persons living in disorganized places.

In truth, however, there were many signs that the presumed connection between gangs and "social disorganization" was suspect. Sociologists going back as early as Frederic Thrasher (1927) had posited too strong a break between a conventional world inhabited by most persons and an unconventional or disorganized world filled with immigrants, poverty, and, of course, gangs. Our world was orderly, and we had a relatively coherent culture. Their world was poorly organized and had a culture that was incomplete or a poor match for our own. Our world may have had problems and persons who did not behave well all the time, but their world was a mess and had many more troublesome persons living in it.

There were sociologists studying deviant behavior and gangs who knew better (Fine 1987; Matza 1964; Moore 1991). Common to their work is the idea that the boundary line between conventional and delinquent behavior for adolescents is fluid. There may be a subculture of delinquency that parallels the peer culture we associate with adolescence. Not all youngsters participate in it, however, and those who do usually keep one foot planted in the conventional world.

Young persons better connected to the conventional adult world or to mainstream values may be less likely to participate in delinquent acts (Hirschi 1969; Tracy 1987). Boys who join gangs may commit more delinquent acts than boys who do not join gangs, and they may persist in delinquent behavior longer than those who never did (Rand 1987; Wolfgang, Thornberry, Figlio 1987). Still, it seems that most adolescents dabble in deviance and break rules every bit as much as

adults do. Experimentation is to be anticipated. Much of their deviance is "normal" or at least should not surprise us.

This was a valuable, even critical, insight. However, this work either was ignored by most students of gang behavior or it was acknowledged for ideas that did not bear on this point (Klein 1995; Klein, Maxson, Miller 1995; Spergel 1995). If observers of contemporary gangs were to comment directly on these ideas, they probably would take great exception to them. They might note that when David Matza used the phrase "delinquency and drift" in 1964 to capture the way adolescents moved easily between deviant and conventional activities, he could not have imagined a world of drive-by shootings and crack cocaine. And when Gary Fine spoke in 1987 of "normal deviance" among adolescents who "ganged" together, the kind of aggression and drug abuse he talked about had not yet emerged full blown in suburban townships and rural villages. Gangs today are different, the experts would say. Their violence is deadly, and there is more of it. The use and sale of narcotics are out of control all over the place.

Joan Moore's telling and prophetic rebuttal to this argument came in 1991, a mere four years after Gary Fine published his thesis about "normal deviance." Her words bear repeating.

The...youth-culture continuum from goody-goody to rowdy shifts over time. The goody-goodyest group...today is considerably more active sexually...than in the past. And the rowdiest group — the gang — is likely to slip much further in the direction of real deviance. Over the past generation American adolescents in general began to act out more. The gang can be expected to be more deviant as the adolescent subculture in general becomes more deviant. (1991)

Moore backed her way into an important point about adolescence in general through her careful descriptions of the extreme behavior she witnessed in barrio gangs. Youth gang members, she and others would argue, are not exaggerated versions of normal teenagers. What they do is push all the boundaries between adolescence and adulthood to the point of rupture and presume to take responsibility for matters of life and death that are supposed to be the special province of more grown-up and seasoned persons.

Over the course of this century adolescents gradually have been ceded more freedom by adults without having been given corresponding bites of responsibility, safe ways to make mistakes, and enough time to grow accustomed to making big decisions (Adams 1995; Modell 1989). There may not have been so great a gulf between the conventional world we occupy and the disorganized world that gangs are supposed to fill as sociologists thought. Nevertheless, it was important for gang experts to continue positing the existence of such a rift in order to justify their view of gangs and to support intervention strategies that provided social scientists with groups to study and programs to evaluate.

One might expect this view of gangs to soften and support for intervention strategies based on it to wane as more evidence about similarities between gang members and youngsters not in gangs becomes available and is publicized (Esbensen et al 1993; Monti 1994; Rand 1987). Unfortunately, that is not likely to happen. There simply exists among many gang researchers a much stronger tendency to ignore evidence that contradicts their views about gangs, or to ignore the fact that even "conventional" youngsters perform illegal and violent acts. Alternatively, they recast such evidence in ways that make it fit the idea of a disorganized world which they have been carrying in their heads for seventy years.

It is not hard to find examples of research being ignored or read so as to keep scholarly attention focused on the presumed alienation of gang members or the hypothetical breakdown of civil society in places that have gangs. The way academics view girls in gangs and the passage of members out of gangs, a process called "maturing out," provides us with evidence of just how big a stretch it is to hold onto the idea that gang members are cut off from regular society. The appearance of gangs in places far removed from city slums, on the other hand, points to a serious problem with our fixation on the idea that only places that are "socially disorganized" have gangs.

It is important to recall that the alienation of gang members figures prominently in both theoretical models accounting for gang behavior and in strategies designed to keep youngsters out of gangs or to wean them from these groups (Sanchez Jankowski 1991). Perhaps this is why Malcolm Klein's (1995) exhaustive profile of persons who join gangs

paints a picture of gang members as individuals with no strengths and many shortcomings. Gang members, according to this view, are little more than broken human beings with bad attitudes.

Earlier in his book, however, after noting the many similarities between boy and girl gangs, Klein described the way girls handle their gang identity. His comments are revealing.

(F)emales, being under such social pressures to develop into nice young ladies, must tread a fine line between their gang roles and the more traditional role behaviors for girls. The girls must find a form of 'acceptably deviant behavior' in order to maintain their dual roles (as) gang girls and developing young women. Some succeed far better than others do. (1995)

The importance of this passage is immediately apparent. Girl gang members are portrayed as being tentative about their involvement in these groups. They also are seen as being drawn to more traditional ways of becoming a girl and as being compelled by those around them to keep their deviant behavior within certain tolerable limits. Girls in gangs may have problems and cause trouble, but Klein has let slip that they are much more complex beings than we usually imagine them to be.

This is not all that is implied in Klein's oversight. After all, if girl and boy gangs are as similar as he contends, then one should expect to find similar types of persons joining them. It follows that boys could be tentative in their involvement with gangs and more conventional in their orientation to the outside world as well. They might be under pressure to become fine persons every bit as much as young women are.

It is possible of course, that lower-class young women somehow "have more exposure to mainstream ideals...and lifestyles" than do young men from the same background (Spergel 1995). Inasmuch as girls live in the same communities and witness the same array of opportunities and pressures as the boys, however, it seems a bit of a stretch to say that girls are more "exposed" to conventional ideas and ways of life. Furthermore, we know that most youngsters living in communities with gangs do not become gang members. Many boys and girls from these neighborhoods, therefore, must be "exposed" to conventional lifestyles

and find ways to adopt them.

This line of reasoning is consistent with arguments made by sociologists David Matza, Gary Fine, and Joan Moore, and even Irving Spergel (1964) who have said that gang members are connected to a larger and more conventional world beyond their groups. This idea is corroborated by Esbensen et al (1993) who found virtually no difference in the involvement of gang members, non-gang offenders, and non-offenders in a variety of conventional activities and only small, but statistically significant, differences in their attitudes. It also is confirmed by Daniel Monti (1994) who discovered that many suburban gang members had close ties with their peers, families, schools, and fellow community residents.

The existence of such ties between gang members and a larger, more conventional world certainly is important to these youngsters, but it also is crucial to the way we think about gangs. These ties show that persons who become gang members have many things in common with those who stay out of gangs. They also reveal that most youngsters probably stay connected to the conventional world in a variety of ways even after they join gangs. Gang members are not completely cut off from regular society, and they have social accomplishments and psychological strengths that would make it hard to distinguish them from their peers.

All of these points help to clarify why so many attempts to prevent youngsters from joining gangs, to wean them from gangs, or to pull gangs apart end up failing so miserably. Such initiatives really tear at the fabric of a community that is stronger or at least woven more tightly than social scientists think. Gang members are enmeshed in their community to varying degrees, and they can pass with relative ease between their peer group and other parts of the community when they choose to avail themselves of that opportunity.

This is why reformers and the police find it hard to make much headway against gangs. These groups are simply too easy to build and much too supple for outsiders to contend with. However, it is that same flexibility and access to the outside world which makes it comparatively easy for gang members to leave their gangs or to "mature out" of being an active gang member when they are ready to do so.

Not much is known about the decision individuals make to leave a gang or to greatly curtail their involvement in most gang

activities. We do know that some persons remain in touch with their old gangs and assume limited roles as "old heads" or advisers to the group. Other veteran members leave gang life altogether. They simply "find an alternative, less stressful, way to meet social and economic needs" by, among other things, marrying and finding steady employment. Alternatively, they grow weary of fighting, worrying about being caught for crimes they commit, or going to jail (Spergel 1995). Though the reasons for leaving the life of a gang member vary, most gang members "mature-out" successfully over a period of time (Spergel 1964; Vigil 1988).

The quiet end of most careers in gangs affirms what we already have noted about the front and middle part of these careers. Persons have a life apart from gangs, and a good portion of that life is dedicated to some pretty conventional ideals and ways of behaving. Even big chunks of a member's routine association with his fellow gangbangers involve patterns of behavior and thinking that would strike one as "normal" or "age appropriate." That is the only reason so many former gang members are able to live out the rest of their days much like the rest of us do: quietly. They have had practice in behaving and thinking like most conventional persons.

The problem for social scientists, public officials, and police departments is that quiet does not sell. It is not especially exciting to study and government agencies do not set aside money to deal with a problem that has taken care of itself. We prefer instead to study and do something about all the nasty noises gang members make while they still are active.

As a practical matter, of course, "maturing out" is the cheapest as well as the most obvious and successful gang intervention strategy ever devised. A more cynical person might note that this is reason enough for social scientists to have missed it and government officials to ignore it. However, there probably is a better explanation for why social scientists failed to study the process of "maturing out" and government officials did not try to exploit it. The idea never occurred to them. They could not have made sense of it in the context of their theories about what made gangs and gang members work as they do. Nor did the idea that members might move on to quieter lives after leaving their gangs fit the accepted view of these persons as being cut off from regular society. The additional concern that these

persons would not be received into a well organized community with a sound culture was not invoked. It was enough to say that gang members were ill-prepared to enter regular society.

The idea of "social disorganization" did play a much bigger part, on the other hand, in accounting for the appearance of gangs in places not at all like inner-city slums. Gangs, as we all know, are supposed to be the by-product of life in rundown city neighborhoods populated by immigrants, other minorities, and the poor. Something about the social structure of these places and the culture of the people living there makes the pursuit of deviant styles of life all but inevitable. Gangs were but one expression of the predisposition of persons and groups living in such circumstances to commit deviant acts.

Communities that are not similarly distressed or populated by disagreeably common human beings are not likely to have gangs. The social structure of these places is theorized to be more developed and integrated. The culture of the persons living there is supposed to be better articulated and in line with the prevailing values and beliefs of the larger society. Deviant thoughts and ways have less room to grow in such communities, and residents have fewer reasons to embrace them.

Despite the absence of evidence pointing to the fundamental erosion of all civil society in city neighborhoods and the availability of information suggesting just the opposite was the case (Gans 1962; Warren 1975), this line of reasoning could hold up as long as gangs were found only in cities. The argument that many city neighborhoods were socially disorganized fit both popular prejudice and scientific theories about the types of persons who lived there, the beliefs they embraced, and the odd customs they practiced.

Once gangs began to appear in communities outside of central cities, however, social scientists had a serious problem. They had to account for the presence of gangs in places whose social structure, culture, and residents had formerly rendered them immune to outbreak of serious deviant behavior carried out by groups. There were two ways to handle this problem. Social scientists could acknowledge that their theory about the breakdown of civil society in places with gangs was in need of a major revision. Or, they could find ways to demonstrate that the breakdown had

spread to places far removed from inner-city slums.

It should come as no surprise that we chose the latter course. What may be more of a surprise are the intellectual twists and turns that we had to take so that new data could be made to fit our old theory. The most important step we took was also the easiest to accomplish. Simply call every place a city, and be done with it. So no matter how small a place might be, as long as it had a gang it must be a city.

There is a certain elegance in this solution, and it is one that Malcolm Klein (1995) readily embraced when he summarized the results of his and Cheryl Maxson's study of gang migration in the United States. It seems, according to Klein, that even places with fewer than 10,000 residents qualify as cities. Now, it is altogether possible for small towns and villages to have urban features (Lingeman 1980). And the census bureau's definition of a city as a place with at least 50,000 residents may strike some observers as arbitrary and a bit too high. Still, it is a hard thing to imagine a place with so few persons having all the diversity and complexity of a city or being as disorganized as cities are supposed to be.

It should be noted, in fairness to Malcolm Klein, that on occasion he also uses the word "town" when referring to these small "cities." More striking, however, are the bold graphs that display the prevalence of gangs in "cities" of different sizes. The word "town" never makes it into these charts. The effect, in any case, is to fix in the reader's mind the idea that it still is only cities or city-like places that have gangs. Not much new need be said about gangs or offered by way of a remedy, because gangs do more or less the same kind of things no matter where they are found. The only important difference about gangs today is that they arise in more and smaller "cities."

How they came to be there, precisely what they do once they appear, and how we are to treat them are all matters that social scientists and public officials can still explain to the rest of us. We already have described in some detail how gangs are to be handled in the new places they emerge. What gangs will do after their arrival on the scene is less well known.

There are two studies that define the range of activities in which gangs outside of central cities probably will engage. In the first study, Muehlbauer and Dodder (1983)

describe a small group of teenagers from an affluent Chicago suburb in the mid-1970's that rebelled against many forms of adult authority. They fought other teenagers from their town on occasion, destroyed property, and engaged in activities dangerous enough for several members to be jailed. Impressive as the exploits of "The Losers" were, even the authors acknowledge that this group was not like the typical inner-city gang of that era (Muehlbauer, Dodder 1983). They had more in common with the rebellious peer groups described in much of Gary Schwartz's (1987) fine book about youth subcultures. At the other end of the range is Monti's (1994) analysis of more than a dozen gangs from the suburbs of St. Louis that had established territories and acted in ways more reminiscent of contemporary street gangs. Composed largely of minority teenagers from different social classes and family situations, these groups engaged in organized drug dealing and violence with gangs from other towns. At the same time, they were much more restrained than many of their big-city counterparts.

Public attention these days is on groups that are more like suburban St. Louis street gangs. Hence, we are interested in what social scientists say when they try to explain how such groups came to be in suburbs at all. The answer, not surprisingly, fits comfortably within their favorite theory about social disorganization, but it goes much further. It implies that the whole country is becoming as mixed up and messed up as the inner-city slums which once were the only place you would find youth gangs.

"The accelerated emergence of gangs," Malcolm Klein (1995) believes, is attributable to the growth of an "urban underclass and the widespread diffusion of gang culture through the media and other sources" into "thousands of towns and cities." The inner-city neighborhood "may serve as the original basis for the emergence of the gang," Bursik and Grasmick (1995) argue, but "the mobility of gang members may expand the geographic range of the group." Whether the new gangs emerging in suburbs and towns are home grown or transplanted there from other places is less important than the fact that "mass population movements" spread "social disorganization across culture, race/ethnicity, and community" lines (Hagedorn 1988; Spergel 1995).

There are two processes at work in the spreading of youth gangs across the United

States, according to these experts. One involves the migration of persons and ideas closely associated with gangs to places unfamiliar with these groups. The second involves assembling a sufficient number of these persons or youngsters sympathetic to them in the same place so that they will fall together and make a gang. These processes, called respectively "contagion" and "convergence" in studies of collective behavior, were first described in the earliest study of gangs in this country (Thrasher 1927).

Robert Bursik and Harold Grasmick (1993, 1995) rely on both processes in order to support their updated version of social disorganization theory. The old version could not account for the appearance of gangs in "relatively stable, low-income neighborhoods" with "ongoing traditions of gang behavior" and in places "beyond the boundaries of the residential neighborhood." What enabled social disorganization and gangs to take root in new and unexpected places, they and others maintain, was that the carriers of disorganization — the urban underclass — have themselves spread or passed on their influence through the media and other outlets for popular culture like rap music.

The "evidence" Bursik and Grasmick (1993, 1995) adduce to support their thesis is not drawn from studies that show big-city gang members setting up groups in suburbs or villages or local youths forming gangs after listening to rap music or watching movies about these groups. It comes from the movement of some minority lower-class persons into communities outside of cities. Inasmuch as social scientists have used the underclass argument to enrich and enlarge their explanation of why gangs have proliferated in cities, there is no reason not to apply that same argument to the sudden appearance of gangs in suburbs and small towns.

There is little doubt that youngsters who were part of a big-city gang would have taken that experience with them when their families moved to new surroundings. Enough of these youngsters could help to start new gangs or to adapt what they know about gangs to fit whatever tradition of peer group affiliation and rivalries they discover in their new towns (Monti 1994). The only thing that could account for the proliferation of gangs in places that have not received many of these youngsters, however, is an extremely weakened civil society. That is exactly what Bursik, Spergel, and Klein are

suggesting when they allude to the spreading of a youth gang culture through the media.

As with so many elements in the old social disorganization theory, there is not much in the new or expanded version of disorganization theory advanced by Bursik and Grasmick that is especially helpful or even new. Allusions to contagion or convergence "theory" were once a staple in research about riots, mass delusions, panics, and other seemingly spontaneous acts. These "theories" played to the idea that outbursts of collective behavior occurred when the social order was crumbling and persons were, to put it kindly, upset and confused. Frederic Thrasher adapted these ideas in order to explain the emergence of gangs in the "socially disorganized" neighborhoods of Chicago during the 1920's.

These ideas fell out of fashion among students of social movements in the late 1950's when academic writers tried to find more sympathetic ways to portray protests, sit-ins, and boycotts that were a staple of the campaign to secure civil rights for black Americans. Social scientists happened onto something called "emergent norm theory." It depicted collective behavior as something that could make new, and presumably better, rules for us to live by in a confusing and changing world (Turner, Killian 1972).

Gang researchers, unable to find much that was ennobling about gangs or the society that spawned them, did not give up the contagion or convergence ideas. However, they did introduce their own version of "emergent norm theory" through the work of persons like Gerald Suttles (1968) and more recently in the work of Joan Moore (1991). Suttles saw gangs working out

a set of practical guidelines that neither rejects nor inverts conventional values but elaborates a code for situations when they are not readily applicable. (Kornhauser 1978)

Gangs did not reinforce a belief system or set of customs that belonged to a vital people. Rather, they helped youthful slum dwellers bring a bit more order and clarity to their disorganized and unsatisfying world (Moore 1991).

GETTIN' RIGHT WITH HUMPTY

So many persons have been saying it for so long that today it is all but taken for granted that gangs emerge where they do and behave

as they do because large pieces of our society are disorganized. The available evidence, though, simply does not support that view. This explanation cannot account for the different ways in which gangs behave. It cannot account for who joins and does not join gangs, how individuals act while they are members, why they leave gangs, and what happens to them after they have gone.

All young persons who become gang members are not defective, and they are not cut off from the regular society as they are said to be. If they were, then few if any of them would "mature out" of their gangs and go on the lead inconspicuous and peaceful lives. Most do.

We are hard pressed to make a convincing case that all American communities have become disorganized and, hence, are likely candidates to have gangs. Even if one agreed with the way social scientists describe or measure "social disorganization," there is no consistent relation between the composition of a community's population and the presence of gangs. All communities with poor minority residents do not have gangs. Places without many poor or minority youngsters have had groups that may not be the mirror image of contemporary street gangs but certainly remind us of them (Muehlbauer, Dodder 1983; Schwartz 1987).

Gangs do not organize and behave in the same way, and these differences are related to the kind of community in which the gangs are found. Yet different types of gangs can appear in communities with similar demographic profiles (Monti 1993). Hence, there is no simple or straightforward relation between a community's population profile and the organization or behavior of gangs.

If the composition of a community's population were related to social disorganization and it, in turn, were tied to the presence of gangs in a clear and consistent way, then strategies that experts developed to deal with gangs and to fix their communities would have worked better than they did. All the money spent over the last seventy years to implement those strategies surely would have made a difference by now. It has not.

There is only one reasonable conclusion that can be drawn regarding the poor showing of social disorganization theory for those persons trying to understand and alter the behavior of gangs. It is wrong.

Our civil society produces and reflects

both the conventional and unconventional behaviors of local groups. No great gulf stands between the conditions of social life that produce clubs, churches, businesses, and festivals and those social conditions that yield marches in behalf of women's suffrage or against abortions, religious pilgrimages and cross burnings, or public beatings for neighborhood miscreants and gangs. They spring from the same source (Tilly et al 1975).

Insofar as these ideas constitute a different way of looking at the world, the world I see can have difficulty accommodating itself to many of the things that gangs do but has no fundamental problem with peer groups exercising considerable influence over young persons. "The resurgence of the peer group and slackening of family influence," suggests Edward Shorter (1975), probably began no later than the 1960s in the country as a whole. He may be correct, but concern about independent children had been expressed in big cities long before Frederic Thrasher conducted the first large-scale study of gangs in the 1920s (Boyer 1978).

The impact of this more recent and broadly felt shift was the same in any case. It enabled adolescents to escape

with increasing frequency into a subculture that is not so much in opposition to the dominant culture as independent of it. And the typical posture of young people in generational relations is not so much rejection as indifference (Shorter 1975)

This is not the first time in history that young persons managed to slip from the control of their families. Something like this occurred in traditional villages as well, but there was an important difference according to Shorter.

The distinguishing feature of the traditional youth group was its complete integration into the larger structure of community life. All the adults sanctioned the *jeunesse* because it served certain essential functions, particularly the organization of mating, sexual surveillance, and the control of anti-social behavior. So there was basic harmony between youth... and the surrounding adult world (1975)

In its place has come a kind of counterpointed melody between the generations that sometimes roils over into a lot of noise. Gangs are

a good example of that noise.

The studied indifference of many young persons to the demands of adults is apparent in several studies of youth culture and gangs (Fine 1987; Monti 1994; Moore 1991; Muehlbauer, Dodder 1983; Schwartz 1987). Rather than expressing outright opposition to many of the central rituals surrounding family life, schooling, and being neighborly, many teenagers show independence in ways that bewilder adults but actually reflect and reinforce much of what goes on in the community every day (Moore 1991).

Slums are not now and may never have been the only places where gangs take root. Sociologists got it at least half right, however, when they insisted that gangs filled an important spot in the lives of their members and, by extension, in the life of the community where they are found. Gangs serve as a kind of rough hewn bridge for many young persons trying to make the sometimes difficult crossing between childhood and adulthood. In turn, how gangs act and the kind of person they help to build tell us something important about adult authority in the community and relations between the several generations dwelling there (Schwartz 1987). If the social scientists who wrote so long and assuredly about "social disorganization" had managed to put a face on their idea, that is what it would have looked like.

Elijah Anderson (1990) raised his finger at the same point when he described the breakdown of adult authority and relations between young persons and "old heads" in the impoverished ghetto community he called "Northton." Several years before Anderson's book received so much attention Gary Schwartz, citing even earlier research by Rivera and Short (1967), observed that much "useful information is missing from the contact black gang youth have with local adults." The absence of good ties between them weakens the

support and guidance (that) underwrite respect for the authority of the older generation. Black gang youth are deprived of the kind of ordinary assistance from adults that other youth take for granted (Schwartz 1987)

Apparently this has not always been the case for gang members. Frederic Thrasher (1927) stumbled onto a similar idea when he noted how boys could be kept in line by local adults who gave them work and involved them

in other grown-up activities. Yet he did not build on that key insight, one supposes, because of his disdain for the adults who dwelled in "Gangland" and some of the questionable enterprises into which they drew young persons.

The picture is not entirely glum. Despite the rather nasty turn gangs have taken in recent years, many communities still do a pretty good job of working their young charges into a conventional grown-up world. Even those communities that have severe gang problems frequently have an array of viable groups and voluntary organizations run by adults that can be mobilized to that end. How many adults and groups actually end up working in behalf of young persons in this way should determine whether a community develops gangs and what those gangs do.

Here in embryonic form, therefore, is the making of a testable hypothesis regarding the organization and behavior of youth gangs in different communities. Places in which relations between young persons and adults are good probably will have fewer gangs, and those gangs should be more restrained. Communities with nominal ties between the generations will have more gangs, or those gangs they do have should be less restrained.

There is no straight-line connection between the economic and demographic profile of a community and its likelihood of having gangs or for those gangs to be more or less rambunctious. Based on what can be gleaned on this point from existing studies, it would seem that communities with a relatively stable working-class or lower-middle class core would have fewer, more restrained gangs. Communities with a lower or higher economic profile and less stability would have more gangs or less restrained groups of adolescents (Cummings 1993; Monti 1993; Moore 1991; Muehlbauer, Dodder 1983; Pinderhughes 1993; Schwartz 1987; Spergel 1964).

The critical factor in this scheme, however, is not the wealth or status of the persons living in a community. It is the ability and willingness of adults working through informal groups, voluntary organizations, and local businesses to engage young persons in a constructive way. Not all youngsters would be "saved," if a community were mobilized to work them into the conventional adult world in a clear and consistent way (Hirschi 1969; Monti 1994; Spergel 1964; Wolfgang et al 1987). In such a community, however, their

chances of making a smoother and faster transition into a conventional adult world should be much improved.

In sum, the secret weapon against gangs has been planted in front of us all along. It does not require a government commission to be discovered. It does not need millions of dollars in grants to be put into operation. It has been tested under extremely inhospitable conditions. And it works.

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