Chapter 1

“Come on Now, I Want to See Blood!”: Choreographed Violence in Gang Initiation Rites

Laura L. Hansen
Western New England University, USA

Melissa E. Freitag
Bowling Green State University, USA

ABSTRACT

Violent initiation rites directed at new members or potential members of an organization are not recent phenomena and not exclusive to joining street gangs or crews. This chapter will explore the origins of violent initiation through history and how contemporary rites used to “welcome” new members in youth gangs mirror other entries into almost exclusively male enclaves. These rituals include controlled, choreographed patterns of violent behavior, including participants vs. voyeurs and number of blows directed at the initiate before the rite is considered to be completed. In addition to taking a historical perspective, recognized predictive risk factors for gang recruitment are listed, including those identified by Hill et al. (1999) in their Seattle study of juvenile delinquency and how it leads down the slippery slope to gang affiliation.

INTRODUCTION

Violent initiation rites directed at new members or potential members of an organization are not recent phenomena and not exclusive to joining street gangs or crews. This chapter explores the origins of initiation through history and how contemporary rites used to “welcome” new members in youth gangs mirror other entries into almost exclusively male enclaves. Commonly termed “blood in, blood out”, the ritual implies that there is no easy way to enter or exit gang life.

Most discussions, research, media items on gang ritual ride on the side of extremes, including commitment of horrific crimes like drive-by shootings, or wholesale homicide (Best and Hutchinson, 1996).

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-9938-0.ch001
This chapter is about the less explored nuances of “beating in” initiation ceremonies, where the neophyte gang member receives controlled, physical abuse at the hands of members of a gang one wishes to become a part of.

These rituals include controlled, choreographed patterns of violent behavior, including participants vs. voyeurs and number of blows directed at the initiate before the rite is considered to be finished. In addition to taking an anthropological, interactionist perspective, recognized predictive risk factors for gang recruitment are examined, including those identified by Hill et al. (1999) in their Seattle study of juvenile delinquency and how these lead down the slippery slope to gang affiliation.

Using a grounded theory approach, we examined 22 gang initiations posted to youtube.com between June 2007 and April 2014. Except in the case of one posting attributed to a 1985 gang initiation, we do not know exactly when the initiations took place. As the motivation of this chapter is to explore reinforced masculinities through gang ceremonies, we will be focusing primarily on the 15 videos collected and coded where males were exclusively present. However, for contrast, we are including the deconstruction of 5 gang initiations that were coed and 2 that were exclusively female gang initiations.

In addition to examining gang initiations for themes of controlled violence, we include an analysis of 14 videos (Males = 7; Females = 7) posted to youtube.com that document public fights that are not part of gang initiation rites. In these cases, the blows exchanged were bilateral, messy, and unorganized, leading us to believe that there is a distinct difference between the violence involved in gang initiation, though it might be described as a “beating in”, that on the surface to have some semblance of rules and civility, as compared to garden variety altercations that come to blows. Admittedly we were observing these rituals from the safety of our homes or university offices and we acknowledge that the selection is subjective in that these were self-reported incidents, and are limited to small world analysis. We cannot assume generalization of our findings, nor do we seek it.

In coding these videos, we developed the following framework: In the face of being blocked from normative routes to expressions of masculine hegemony (e.g. education, subsequent “legitimate” career), are new recruits looking to gangs as a means by which to be accepted into a class of hyper-masculine, modern day warriors?

We are not passing judgment, but rather explore this in the direction that anthropologists and sociologists are currently headed. We view members of gangs as an underclass, victims of economic disadvantage and marginalization. As Stoll (2013) questions in his review of gang literature, should gangs be viewed as a general threat to society, or the fact that they are threats to themselves warrants suppression? Either way, the anatomy of gang initiation rites, when individuals are assumed to fully committed to joining, whether by choice or by coercion, is worth exploring.

MICRO/MACRO PROCESSES

One can point to a number of risk factors for why juveniles are attracted to gang life, many of which are listed within the pages of this book, including this chapter. In the extreme, children are subjected to pressures on the local and global level that make it near impossible to imagine a “normal” life or realization of the “American Dream” of gainful employment, “normal” family life (spouse, children), home ownership. There is no one smoking gun variable to explain away gang membership, but rather the additive effect of a number of social ills that contribute to the compulsion to join.