

Gangs: Creating a sense of belonging

The following website will provide the information you need to complete this worksheet:
https://people.missouristate.edu/michaelcarlie/what_I_learned_about/gangs/culture.htm

1. Background factors

Take a closer look at the sections "Gangs and the subculture of the lower class" and "Violence as a characteristic of gang culture". Fill in the boxes.

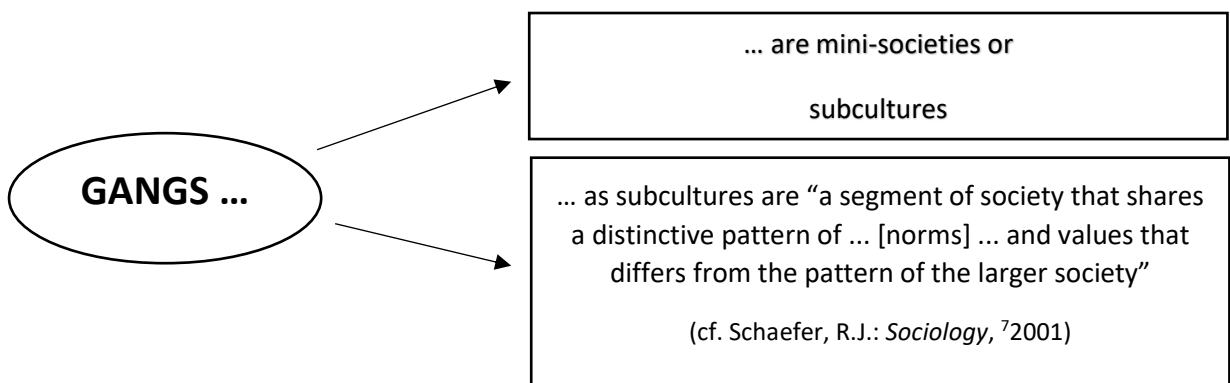
Typical backgrounds

- lack of opportunity
- lack of jobs
- poor quality schools
- failing public services
- incompetent parents / broken families
- discrimination from larger society

characteristic lower-class attitudes (cf. W.B. Miller)

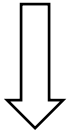
- toughness (masculinity, strength, endurance...)
- smartness (outsmarting other persons, being street-wise...)
- excitement (thrills instead of inactivity)
- autonomy (from mainstream society's rules and laws)

2. Features of gang culture



Now take another look at the website. Search for the features of gang culture mentioned in the next section of this worksheet and find examples from the website or your own knowledge.

gang culture



.... language:

special gang language, codes, throwing signs (= non-verbal language), graffiti

(also: gangster rap → racist, misogynist, violent, aggressive, chauvinist...)

... beliefs, values, norms:

behavioural expectations ("respect", no "dissing" of other gang members, other codes of behaviour), focus on status within the gang, often violent and/or involved in crime, claiming territory,

have an alternative belief system opposed to mainstream society's values and norms...

.... symbols and artefacts:

rites (e.g. initiation), traditions

graffiti tags

tattoos, gang clothing (e.g. bandanas)

cars, weapons...

1. Discussion

How can we use these insights to explain the attraction that gangs hold for young people, especially from low-chance / low-status environments?

Gangs can offer a way out of a fairly bleak environment. They offer excitement, an identity outside mainstream society, a kind of "family" with mutual support, a strong sense of identity, a feeling of belonging (gang clothes, culture, signs...) and respect and maybe a certain source of income (→ crime)

Now let's apply these insights to 'Gran Torino'.

Underline the relevant parts of the dialogue and work out the arguments that the gang members use to convince Tao to join the gang! You may also “read between the lines”.

DVD 00:15:53 – 00:16:34

SUE

What do you want?

SPIDER

What? We can't just come and talk to my little cousin?

SUE

He doesn't want to talk to you.

SPIDER

I am here right.

SMOKIE

Hey, Spider, who is that? What's up?

SUE

Spider? Is that what he just called you, Fong?

SPIDER *(shows off his tattoo)*

Spider!

[...]

SMOKIE

Hey, you will roll with us man, come on?

SPIDER

Dude.

SMOKIE

Come on ride with us. Chill with us.

SPIDER

You need somebody to protect you, man. That's what your big cousins are for.

SMOKIE

Look, dawg. I've been there, I've done it and I've seen it. Back in a day everybody wanted to beat me, dawg. But now, look, nobody wants to fuck with me. Come on man, let's go.

SPIDER

We are cousins, right? Come on.

We are cousins, right? We are a family.

SMOKIE

Look, I am a brother to Spider, as he is a brother to me.

SPIDER

Come on.

(pulls off Tao's gardening glove)

Take this shit off.

SMOKIE

That's a woman's work, man.

Come, get your hands dirty, man.

The gang can offer Tao a new and “dangerous” identity.

Gangs offer protection.

With a gang, even underdogs will be respected because there is mutual protection and strength in numbers. Therefore, gangs will boost their members' status.

The gang offers alternative family ties → support, friendship, loyalty

The gang can offer an exciting way of life.

Further discussion:

1. Why does Sue pronounce Spider's real name (Fong) with such emphasis?
2. Sue tells Walt that "Hmong girls over here fit in better. The girls go to college, the boys go to jail." Refer to section 1 of your worksheet (background factors) and examine whether or to what extent these factors can also be applied to the Hmong gang.

1. Sue wants to annoy Spider by negating his new identity as a tough gang member. This is why she makes it clear to him that despite his macho appearance he is still "Fong" (i.e. a normal person).
2. Background factors: gang members are probably unemployed, live in a low-status area of Detroit, low social prestige in mainstream society BUT they come from close-knit families.

According to Sue, Hmong boys seem to have more problems fitting into mainstream US society. Joining a gang could be seen as an attempt to negate mainstream society's (and their family's) expectation to adapt and fit in. The gang offers an alternative family and/or identity with an individual set of values.

Extra: The black gang and Trey (Sue's boyfriend)

DVD 00:30:00 – 00:31:00

Compare the black gang and Trey, considering the following aspects:

1. style of clothing
2. language
3. behaviour

Trey obviously tries to emulate a "black style". He dresses like a stereotypical black rapper, puts on a "black" accent and uses stereotypical "black" ways of behaviour (high-five handshake)

Try to explain why the blacks reject Trey's attempts at fraternizing with them:

They see Trey's attempt to copy them for what it is - trying to curry their favour by imitating them. Just having the "right" clothes, accents or ways of behaviour doesn't make him a member of their group. In other words, "being a bro" (i.e. belonging or not belonging) can't be won by adapting the way you look or how you speak.

??? Is this an issue of skin colour? If Trey were black, would the scene have turned out differently???

The leader of the black gang calls Trey 'boy'. Use the following quotation to explain why he chooses this particular epithet and what he wants to express with it.

"But others must understand the history of African Americans, and what it has always meant to black men for someone to call them a 'boy.' One, it's the ultimate sign of disrespect, and is often more offensive than calling them the N-word. For years black men were summarily dismissed and treated with disregard. It was as if their stature was diminished when someone white called them a boy."
(Roland S. Martin, CNN, <http://ac360.blogs.cnn.com/2008/04/15/understanding-why-you-dont-call-a-black-man-a-boy/>)

'Boy' used to be a typical and discriminating form of address that a white would use for a black. By calling Trey 'boy' the black man turns the tables, i.e. he addresses Trey from a position of superiority and clearly shows his disrespect. In other words, he emulates the kind of behaviour a white supremacist might have shown towards a black.