Introduction:

Gangs: Their intergroup, group, and communicative parameters

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In his Preface to this special issue on gangs Malcolm Klein urges that we should remember that gangs are groups and not merely aggregations of individual gang members. It was this thought that prompted our development of this special issue. That gangs are groups is an undeniable reality, yet empirical examinations of the specific group processes that provide gangs with their infrastructure is rare. Klein’s portrayal of gang/group processes in his Preface neatly captures the essence of how aggregations of individuals can become one cohesive entity that employs social norms, communicates its existence and develop an oppositional culture. These, as Klein acknowledges, are potential precursors to violence and, as gang researchers know only too well, gangs are notorious for their violence. As Klein notes, the oppositional nature of gangs leads them to reinterpret efforts made by others to deter or to help them as attempts to denigrate them. Where does this reinterpretation originate? Does it stem from oppositional individuals or from group norms that dominate individuals and shape members’ attitudes to authority figures? Klein also notes that attempts to deter gangs often have the opposite effect and work to reinforce members’ gang identities and the group’s cohesiveness. Without a fuller understanding of the group processes and how they inspire members’ behavior we are at a loss when trying to *predict* the effects of intervention efforts and only see their effects at the postmortem of our efforts. Klein argues that the strength of group processes in gangs is stronger than anything we bring in to prevent, reduce, and deter gang membership. He provides a compelling argument that our resources are no match for a gang’s group processes. It does not matter whether we address gang formation, gang prevention or gang intervention; group processes are vital and in terms of importance they trump demographics, gender, structure or levels of membership.

Nevertheless, a multi-national, multi-discipline, multi-method approach to studying gangs offers promise that we can unravel and understand more about the group processes that are the lifeblood of gangs. The papers included in this special issue work have been brought together to reflect some of the gang research that considers group processes and communication patterns in gangs. In the first paper Wood takes a social psychological perspective to consider some of the vast array of potential group processes that may be at work in a gang. The paper examines how these group processes may work to influence individual gang members’ cognitions, attitudes and behavior and argues that group processes need more specific attention if we are to develop effective interventions to reduce gangs. In the second paper Bolden uses a social network paradigm to examine the intergroup relationship dynamics of gang members in emerging and chronic gang cities. Bolden’s findings challenge common assumptions that gang members seldom interact with rivals unless it is with violence. Based on in-depth interviews, Bolden reveals that individuals’ outgroup ties with non-affiliated and even arch-rival gangs are common and that family members, business enterprises, romantic interests and even friendships facilitate these ties.

In contrast to Bolden’s paper, our third paper shows how gang members use the social-cognitive strategy of de-humanizing rivals to justify violence against them. Alleyne, Fernandes and Pritchard reveal the importance of moral disengagement strategies in gang membership – particularly de-humanization tactics. The authors note how de-humanizing victims facilitates gang member violence, especially in formally structured groups who have a committed and cohesive membership and a collective identity that the group communicates to outgroups. In paper number four, Densley, Cai and Hilal examine the potential of social dominance orientation (SDO) to explain intergang conflict. The authors report that core gang members have higher SDO and lower trust propensity than do peripheral members – and this is regardless of time spent with the gang. The authors contend that SDO and associated attitudes and behaviors in gang members are likely to be nurtured and reinforced via group processes and that further work examining this relatively new area of gang research is vital for us to understand more of the role that SDO takes in a gang context.

The fifth paper in this special issue focuses on gang membership in a prison setting. Examining young offenders, Scott reports that although young offenders involved in institutional gangs have higher levels of aggressive and violent attitudes than nongang offenders, these levels reduce with length of time the youth are involved in the gang. Scott suggests that these findings are important for prison policies and treatment programs both of which should consider duration of group membership as an important factor when targeting interventions at gang members. The next paper in this special issue takes a broader perspective of criminal groups to consider how cultures that foster codes of honor and masculinity may facilitate the recruitment of young people into criminal organizations and gangs. Travaglino, Abrams, Randsley de Moura and Russo examined young Italians’ attitudes towards criminal organizations. Their findings show that holding positive attitudes towards criminal organizations and having low levels of vicarious shame regarding the activities of those criminal organizations mean that youth are less likely to take an anti-mafia stance. The authors suggest that cultures that ideologically emphasize the importance of honor and masculinity may foster positive attitudes towards gangs that also endorse these ideologies.

Our final paper in this special issue offers a theoretical perspective on gangs by considering the roles that social identity and identity-related communication take in promoting gang membership among youth who seek a familial sense of belonging from their group membership. Goldman, Giles and Hogg consider the messages communicated by gang members as an identity construction, projection and management process in a gang’s dynamics. The authors argue that the social psychological underpinnings of gang membership need greater attention so that we can identify the role that group processes play in gang membership more specifically.

Our aim in compiling this volume of work is to encourage future research into group processes and communication patterns in gangs. Indeed, the papers in this volume already present a diverse range of topic areas that would most certainly benefit from further sustained research examining group processes. Thus, we are very grateful to the experts who have written such engaging and thought provoking papers for this special issue.

Finally, as editors of this special issue we would like to thank Dominic Abrams and Michael Hogg for their invitation to edit this special issue. We would also like to thank Libby Cuthbert for her patience and attention to detail throughout the process of putting the issue together.