

**Are You Down?  
Power Relations and Gender Reconstruction Among  
Latina Gang Members in Los Angeles**

by

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***Abstract.***

*For decades sociologists and criminologists have sought to understand and explain the phenomena of gang-related crime and delinquency. The classical literature on this topic has typically been related to the male delinquent experience. Recent literature related to female experiences has tended to explain female gang behavior from a male perspective. The following study used semi-structured qualitative interviews with ten female Latina gang members in order to explain the important role that the gang plays in the lives of young, oppressed Latina women in the Los Angeles area. By examining these women's stories from a feminist epistemological standpoint, this study will explain the ways in which identities are constructed for Latinas in disenfranchised neighborhoods in Los Angeles, and how their sexuality and femininity is reconstructed through their affiliation with the gang.*

**Introduction**

A proliferation of literature discusses male gang delinquency and attempts to explain the prevalence of female gang activity. Unfortunately, the majority of this literature attempts to explain women and their experiences only in relation to their male counterparts, such that women's sexuality and femininity is analyzed within a masculine context. As Messerschmidt (1997) argues, "criminology lacks theory that does not belittle women and punish them intellectually for stepping beyond the bounds of emphasized femininity" (p. 68). Understanding female gang members requires better than that.

Moira Gatens (1996) provides critical commentary on the now-traditional distinction between sex (the genetic male versus female) and gender (traditionally argued to be socially constructed categories denoting one's level of masculinity or femininity) that seems to almost consider these two independent. She argues they are not, i.e., that the body is not a "blank slate" that is somehow defined solely through "the effect of ideology or cultural values" (p. 70). Instead, Gatens (1996) maintains

that the body is necessarily a “sexed subject” (p.9) with the implication that sex differences necessarily have an impact on the lived experiences of men and women. Stated another way, the social significance of similar actions played out by men and women will vary as a result of sex.

Instead of understanding the development of gender as a purely social construction, Gatens (1996) expands on Foucault’s work and asserts that gender should be viewed “as the way in which power takes hold of and constructs bodies in particular ways” (p. 70). In other words, she is arguing that gendered power relations, in turn, play a role in shaping or recreating gender.

Consistent with this view, Chesney-Lind (1988; 2006) argues that developing a feminist framework requires more than the ‘add women and stir approach.’ That is, one cannot simply insert women into traditional male-centered theories that seek to understand male crime and criminality. Women have been subjected to unique and complex experiences that are not equal to the male experience. Therefore, women require a theory that incorporates their unique socio-political, racial, and class experiences to help describe their distinct position within society (Chesney-Lind 1988, 2006; J. Miller, 2001). At the very least, women need to be taken on their own ground so that any areas where theory works across genders are demonstrated and not simply assumed.

To completely ignore the influence of race, class, and culture on the construction of identity (particularly on sexuality and femininity) is to ignore the complex role that these constructs play in society as a whole and to varying degrees within different sub-communities and cultures. These constructs do have a direct impact on power relations, especially in socio-economically disadvantaged communities and in communities where gender roles and opportunities are sharply distinguished. These power relations may in turn work to create social, political, economic, and familial strain, which in turn, construct, shape, and reinforce gendered differences in male and female gang members. This idea will be referred to as the “power-strain-gender discourse” since it can be argued that the pressures of gender, compounded with social, economic, and familial strain work to create a disempowering environment which, in turn, works to construct identity. Propelled by this conceptual framework, we set out to examine gang women’s experiences in a Hispanic community in East LA.

### **Research Methods**

Data for this analysis were collected through in-depth interviews at a well-known gang-intervention program located in East Los Angeles. Ten women of Hispanic origin participated in the interviews. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 36 years. All women had been active gang members in local Los Angeles street gangs, and most of the women had been arrested for illegal activity at some point in their lives.

Participants were selected using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques to ensure participants were able to provide the information necessary to answer the research question. The first three women were approached at the agency because they were identified as being willing to participate in the study. After their interview, they were asked if they knew of any other women affiliated with the agency who might also be interested in participating in the study, and the sample snowballed from there.

Before beginning each interview, informed consent was obtained reminding them that their participation was voluntary and assured that any identifiable data

would be kept confidential. Participants were told that their information would be anonymized in order to protect their identities, and were asked to select pseudonyms toward that end. None of the names that appear below are the real names of the participants.

Although some of the women belong(ed) to the same gang, approximately five different gangs were represented by the women who were interviewed. It was less important to understand the dynamics of a particular gang than it was to understand what it means to be a Latina involved in a gang. Interviews lasted from one to two hours each. Interview questions were semi-structured and open ended, and personal narrative was encouraged throughout the interview process in order to elicit information related to the initial research questions.

After conducting the interviews, the women were paid \$15.00 for their participation, though they were not informed about this financial reward until they had completed the interview. All ten interviews are included in the following analysis.

Interviews were transcribed from the original tape recording. Transcription of the data helped to ensure that the interviews accurately reflected the participant's voice in her own words. Data were then hand-coded using a numerical coding system, and relevant themes identified.

Steps were taken in order to ensure reliability and validity of the data. First, due to the possibilities of exaggeration and reactivity, certain interview questions were repeated at different points during the interview process to determine whether there were any discrepancies in the responses. Second, responses were often repeated back to participants in order to ensure that the information provided was correct and accurately represented what the participants were saying. Finally, participants were sent a draft of the analysis and asked to provide feedback in order to ensure that the analysis provided an accurate representation of the interviews conducted.

### **Results/Analysis**

#### *Where I grew up at, it was a ghetto*

Through the interviews it became apparent that there is a unique power differential at play in the neighborhoods ('hoods) in which the women were born and raised. These neighborhoods – all of which were plagued by poverty, crime, drugs, delinquency, and gang-related violence – were racially and economically segregated, and the women were abundantly aware that mainstream society were neither aware of nor cared about them. As Mari, 21, rhetorically questioned, “They fixed up fuckin’ Hollywood...but why the fuck didn’t they fix where I live?”

Gangs were geographically based at a very local level. Body and facial tattoos advertised neighbourhood-based gang identities; a tattooed “18,” for example, advertised that the woman was from the 18<sup>th</sup> street gang. All of the women disclosed that they came from poverty-stricken, violent neighborhoods where joining a gang both provided a sense of family that was often otherwise missing, while also offering necessary protection against rival neighborhood violence. Monique, 21, stated that “Where I grew up at, it was a ghetto...Everybody in the neighborhood was corrupt. Either you be for the hood [defend the neighborhood through gang affiliation] or you be on drugs.”

Monique denied any option other than gang affiliation because she knew no other lifestyle.

The powerful realities these young women faced and are forced to live with virtually blind them and prevent them from seeing other options or ways of life. Their

neighborhood, in a sense, creates a metaphorical smoke screen that does not allow these women to see anything beyond the boundary lines of the neighborhood itself. As Mari stated, "It's like a black hole."

*Whatever was gonna keep me out of that home, I would do...*

Jenny, 19, recalled growing up with a single mother who was addicted to drugs and involved in a gang. She reported intense anger towards her mother and towards her environment during her adolescence. "My mom coulda been good, ya know? But it's just the area, the bad people around you, ya know?" After her mother was arrested and incarcerated, Jenny began to spend more time with her peers in the neighborhood and began to engage in similar behaviors as her mother. She stated that she used to drink, use drugs, and party with the boys and men in her gang.

Through her story, Hazel, 25, shows how the stress of home and school impacted her need to find love, acceptance, and protection in the gang. As a child and adolescent, Hazel had difficulties at home and at school. Her father was a prominent member of the neighborhood gang that she later joined. He also had a tendency to abuse alcohol and drugs and became physically abusive to the women in his family when he was under the influence of drugs and alcohol ("you mention it, I've been hit by it," Hazel stated). Hazel's mother, on the other hand, was often too busy caring for her six other children to provide Hazel with the attention and guidance Hazel desired. "[The worst part of the day was] going home. I hated going home... [so I began to use drugs] to forget about my problems. To go home and feel no pain".

School was an equally painful experience for Hazel, who had difficulty understanding the course work. She reported that she was ridiculed at school because of her academic struggles and that she was "an outcast." At age 14, Hazel was shot after school in the school yard. Her neighborhood was the only place where she felt loved, accepted, and respected. "I pretty much gave up on my life... I wanted to be accepted. I was tired of people making fun of me." Hazel admitted that she desperately wanted to achieve academically but was unable to do so because of her fear of being further ridiculed at school each day. With no additional support or interventions from teachers or counselors, Hazel decided to drop out of school and "hang out" on the street with her homeboys. It only seemed logical that she make this decision "because everybody wants to be part of something."

Smurf, age 24, had an equally unfavorable view of the educational system. She said,

"At school, I think it was the worst because... I [felt like I had to] prove a point. That's where the money was at... school is not safe because it's the easiest way to get drugs, alcohol, sex... I liked it but it was really hard... because I had to watch my back."

While Smurf did not face the same educational struggles as Hazel, school was, in a sense, an extension of her home life – dangerous and filled with drugs, alcohol, and violence.

Like Hazel and Smurf, Jenny survived turmoil at home while living with a mother who was an active gang member and substance-addicted. Jenny's unstable home environment led her to have difficulties in school, something which her teachers, counselors, and school administrators failed to notice. After her mother was incarcerated, Jenny was taken to a group home where she became another face in the crowd. The trauma of her mother's incarceration was not addressed, and Jenny was, once again, not provided with the love and support she needed in order to thrive

emotionally or academically. She stated that she

“felt useless...I said [to myself] ‘you’re not doing shit here’ ...you just walk around with anger...All that is just anger [so] you try to wash it off...you can’t shake it off...the gang, that’s how you walk away from the stress.”

Jenny embraced the gang and everything it had to offer her because it was able to meet her needs -- something her mother and counselors in school and at the group home were unable to do. Her homeboys provided Jenny the support she was lacking and introduced her to drugs and alcohol, which she used as an outlet to relieve her stress.

Vivian, a 36 year-old former gang member admitted that she used to steal money and cars and sell drugs in order to survive. With two parents addicted to heroin, and a father who was in and out of prison her entire life, Vivian grew up in a combination of group homes, foster homes, and “on the streets.” She believes that her reasons for joining the gang were two-fold. First, gang membership offered her a sense of family that she never had. “It was unavoidable because it was like a family to me,” she stated. Second, the gang provided Vivian with the protection that she needed in order to survive. She stated that she and her fellow gang members “took from the rich and gave to the poor.” Members of the gang then played an intrinsic role in helping one another to meet their basic needs for survival.

Finally, the issue of childhood trauma, sexual abuse, and other types of intra-familial violence that were imposed upon these young women at an early age may play a role in why these women sought life with the gang. As mentioned previously, many of the young women interviewed joined the gang in order to find the supportive family that they were lacking. However, another important factor related to gang affiliation appears to be that of the protection that the gang offers these women. Every woman interviewed endured some form of abuse at the hands of their parents. For these women, the gang then served to protect these women from their abusive home lives. Paradoxically, however, the women often encountered a different kind of abuse upon entry into the gang.

Mari, 21, stated that she joined the gang in order to escape her turbulent home environment. Mari lived with her grandmother as a child because her mother was ill-equipped to care for her. Once Mari’s mother regained custody of her daughter, Mari moved in with her mother and her mother’s boyfriend. Over the next few years, Mari was physically abused by her mother and molested and sexually tortured by her mother’s boyfriend. She stated that she was drawn to the gang because “whatever was gonna keep me away from that home, I would do.”

This echoes findings from numerous studies concerning the correlation between girls’ exposure to interpersonal violence (particularly in the home) and gang involvement (see Chesney-Lind, 1989; Deschenes & Esbensen, 1999; Miller, 2001; Moore & Hagedorn, 1996; Hunt, Mackenzie, Joe-Laidler, 2000). For example, Miller (2001) found that approximately 42% of the girls involved in gangs that she interviewed had been physically attacked (as opposed to 26% of non-gang girls), and 52% had been sexually assaulted (as opposed to 22% of non-gang girls). Additionally, Deschenes and Esbensen (1999) found that girls in gangs exhibited lower levels of parental attachment than girls not involved in gangs. Children who exhibit low levels of parental attachment tend to experience higher levels of child abuse and neglect at the hands of their primary caregivers (Alexander, 1992). Whether these women are searching for a sense of family belonging or for protection

from their families (or both), current research clearly indicates that there is some type of relationship between interpersonal victimization, low levels of parental attachment, and gang-involvement for young, impoverished women.

In a community where school should have been a refuge, a safe-haven for these young women to keep them from becoming involved in the life on the streets, the overcrowded, poorly funded schools in Los Angeles' urban ghettos have merely created off-street drug markets and places where young women frequently have to worry about their own safety (Silver, Saunders, Zarate, 2008). School also is a place that is supposed to instill hope in students and teach them how to set goals and work towards accomplishing those goals for a brighter future. However, fear for their own safety, coupled with overcrowded classrooms made it difficult for these young women to see any hope beyond crime, gangs, drugs, and poverty.

Through their experiences, these young women are able to show how various types of strain - familial, financial, educational, and sociopolitical - resulting from economic differentials in their communities - create a type of emotional turmoil which leads them into a gang lifestyle. Though all of the women interviewed do take responsibility for the choices they have made, almost all admit that they did not see any other options available to them. Vivian, 36, stated that she wants people to understand the choices she had to make to survive.

"I'd [tell people] that [gang life] *was* my choice. That was all I knew. I didn't have no family...I [was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade] when I started running the streets with my homies. That *was* my family."

In these women's cases, the gang acts as a surrogate family and provides them with the love, support, protection and respect that they did not receive in their homes or at school.

While Joan Moore (1991) argues that her data do not show a direct relationship between financial strain and gang membership, it could be argued that the power differentials imposed on people living in urban ghettos systematically works to disempower them- particularly young women. These feelings of powerlessness are what lead some young women to seek refuge in something that allows them to define themselves as being someone and being a part of something.

*Everybody wants to be part of something*

Broidy and Agnew (1997) suggest that strain is experienced differently by men and women.

"Several strain and feminist theorists have argued that males are more concerned with material success and extrinsic achievements, whereas females are more concerned with the establishment and maintenance of close relationships with mean/purpose in life (p. 6)"

The women interviewed for this study often joined the gang because of the respect, support, and feelings of safety offered to them. Each participant made a statement about feeling as though the gang offered her a sense of being part of something (a family, in many cases), which she had never felt before. In other words, entry into the gang allowed these women to create an identity for themselves. Indeed, it could be argued that through the provision of safety, respect, and a sense of family, the gangs for these young women were of paramount importance in helping the women shape their identities.

Selena, 33, commented on being a woman in a gang. She said "it felt like you had some pride there but I think it was more about the friendships...it's a good feeling too...after everything I went through I felt like I just needed to be accepted

somewhere.” Acting as a surrogate family to these women, the gang strengthens and reinforces their sense of identity.

Joe-Laidler and Hunt (2001) describe the importance of respect for women involved in gangs. They state that “‘respect’ demands deference to, and at the same time, commands status, power and authority in an environment with few legitimate avenues (e.g. employment, education) to attain a sense of esteem and importance for oneself and among one’s peers” (p. 664). Many of these young women have grown up in communities and in homes (and attended schools) where they have not been respected in the traditional sense. Their bodies have been violated physically and sexually, their homes broken and chaotic, and their schools plagued with drugs and violence. However, these girls command and receive respect from one another through demonstration of their camaraderie.

In the case of the women in this study, the idea of respect is two-fold. One must show respect for their neighborhood by “being down,” or, representing the ‘hood. Additionally, all of the women interviewed explained the importance of having respect for oneself. In order to obtain self-respect, a woman is expected to abstain from promiscuous behavior and defend herself at all costs. Interestingly, the idea of respect appears to be developed upon entry to the gang.

When asked what respect meant to her, Monica, age 23, stated that “respect means respecting myself by taking care of myself...in order for me to give respect, I had to get it...I wasn’t letting myself being taken control of.” In this case, Monica shows that she was not willing to allow others to objectify or take advantage of her. She defended herself to show others just how much respect she had for herself. This concept of respect is crucial for girls and young women involved in gang culture because it helps them take control of and shape their identities to reflect strength and, paradoxically, develop a sense of autonomy. In a culture where these women receive such little respect politically, educationally, and socially, their neighborhood and their “homies” allow them the opportunity to define themselves as something that transcends society’s labels for them.

In her effort to describe the idea of being “down” for her neighborhood and showing respect and pride for the neighborhood, Monica eloquently drew a parallel between the gang and middle-class American culture. She stated, “you grow up in America and you learn to take pride in America.” She went on to explain that people from her “hood” felt pride for their neighborhood the same way that Americans feel pride for their country and represent this sense of pride through patriotism. When asked how she decided to direct her pride towards her neighborhood (as opposed to her country), Monica said “maybe because I thought people would make fun of me...if you weren’t from a gang, you were nobody and we [her community] wanted to be somebody.”

Despite being born and raised in the United States, Monica explained how she never felt as though she had access to resources or the same opportunities as other white, middle-class children her age because of where she lived. Denial of resources and opportunities and the means to access these resources and opportunities leaves young women with a sense of powerlessness. As a result, they desire to make a name for themselves and “be somebody.”

Hazel admitted to being “jumped in” (beaten up for 30 seconds in order to become initiated into the gang) to her gang by three older men. She was given the choice of being jumped in by younger men who “weren’t nobody,” but instead she chose the more experienced, ruthless men because of their status and “because I

wanted respect.” After being hospitalized for the injuries she sustained, Hazel returned to her neighborhood the following day as a homegirl (female gangster), was “strapped up” (given a gun), and had thus won the respect of the rest of homeboys (male gangsters). Hazel’s identity as a homegirl was constructed through her ability to show how “down” she was for the neighborhood and the gang by accepting a brutal beating.

*You wanna feel that power...this is who I am. This is what I represent.*

Once a girl/woman joins a gang, there appears to be a recreation or redistribution of power among the homegirls. The act of joining the gang, in other words, creates a power shift through affiliation. It seems as though there may be a type of struggle for power once a woman has joined a gang. Though the women are, in some ways, unified through their affiliation and sense of family, there is also a struggle to obtain the power and status that they never experienced in their homes, schools, or communities. It is this point in the power-strain-gender cycle that women tend to enter the gang.

In order to earn respect and, thus, increase one’s status within the gang, young women have to be willing to take orders from their superiors. Anais said that she would do whatever she was told to do when ordered by those with more power than she. “I do what they want me to...no hesitation, no questions asked. They’re like teachers. You get told to do an assignment, you do it, you get an ‘A,’ you pass.” By following the orders of the “shot callers,” or, superiors, Anais was able to transform her status and move up the hierarchy of power.

Conversely, Portillos (1997) shows how a woman who does not prove her loyalty to the gang is seen as being beneath those who are willing to follow orders from the shot callers. One participant in his study stated that if a young woman is asked to commit a crime and does not follow through, she gets “labeled as a weak ass ranker. You know, you’re not down anymore and you can’t get that feeling of respect from the neighborhood” (Portillos in Chesney-Lind & Hagedorn, 1999: 241).

The women interviewed demonstrated how their relationships with other women in the gang could either facilitate a rise in status or diminish one’s position. The relationships between and among the homegirls is of importance when understanding how women create, redefine, and empower, their actions and encounters with others. It could be argued that these women are merely recreating a power system similar to the traditional ones to which they have been exposed. However, it is more likely that these women’s disempowering experiences within their communities and homes have led them to recreate and redistribute status and the labels which denote status in a different manner. Because there is an implied understanding between the homegirls that particular actions lead to a young woman being seen in a certain way, women are aware of the consequences (either positive or negative) of their actions and how it will impact their status within the gang.

*I knew they were just hos...*

Once power structures have been redefined within the gang, the way in which women ‘do gender’ in relation to one another shifts. The intersectionality of race, class, gender, and other identity-defining markers combine to form multiple oppressions- gendered relations being one factor to stem from these struggles. If power does, in fact, play a role in defining gender and gendered relations, then a redistribution of power would impact the way in which the women in the gang ‘do gender,’ or act in a gendered manner. Many feminist scholars agree gender does not exist in and of itself. Rather there exists a gendered social system that creates rules

and regulates how humans ‘do gender’ on a daily basis (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). Gatens (1996) argues that “ what is required is an account of the ways in which the typical spheres of movement of men and women and their respective activities construct and recreate particular kinds of body to perform particular kinds of tasks” (p. 69). When specific social and gang-related tasks are performed by young women there is a natural shift in gender relations.

People construct the ways in which they ‘do gender’ according to a social relational context (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). That is, people act in a gendered manner in accordance with the way in which they see themselves in relation to others (both men and women). The most obvious example of this reconstruction of gendered behavior relates to ways in which women define themselves in relation to other female gang members. During this analysis, many of the young women discussed a clear gendered and sexualized hierarchy that is created by the women within the gangs. While women’s’ relationships to the homeboys should not be ignored when conceptualizing the social relational context of how women do gender, hardly any research has focused on how women are responsible-in part- for their own gendered performances (for an exception, see Miller, 2001). If one conceptualizes the hierarchy as being a pyramid with the most powerful members on the top and the “weakest” members on the bottom, subthemes, which are clearly gendered, begin to emerge.

As Figure 1 illustrates, on the top of the hierarchical pyramid are the older female members, known as “original gangsters” (OGs), or “shot callers” (people who tell those of lesser power what to do in order to support the gang). The term “shot caller” denotes a type of power that only these women have. They are the only women in the gang who have the authority to make demands upon the other women, and they, in turn, have the power to enforce gang rules and norms. The vast majority of shot callers are sometimes known to exhibit certain physically traditional male characteristics. The women who identified as shot callers all identified as being “tomboys.”

Figure 1: Gendered and sexualized hierarchy of roles within the gang

At age 34, Candy is considered by her peers to be an OG. Candy stated, "I'm like one of the guys. I'm gay. But I know I'm a woman...they [the homeboys] love me, I love them." Candy, like many of the OGs and shot callers, identified herself as retaining more masculine traits. Other OGs and shot callers interviewed for the study identified as being either lesbian or bisexual, and admitted to displaying traditional masculine behavior which included dressing in oversized, men's clothing.

Hazel, a shot caller in her gang, reflected upon her experiences at the top of the hierarchy. She said,

"I can't speak for the [other] women. I wasn't allowed to hang out with the girls. I hung out with the homeboys...it felt good [to not be] an outcast like a woman...I was gonna be a woman who did something for the neighborhood."

Hazel spent most of her time with the homeboys engaging in similar violent and illegal activities. Interestingly, Hazel identifies being female with being an "outcast." Recall from the previous section Hazel's desire to be accepted and not be seen as an outcast. Here she shows how the choices she made in order to obtain more power within the gang led to her performance of a different type of femininity. While traditional research might argue that Hazel and Candy were identifying with a type of hegemonic masculinity, this argument fails to take into account the complexity of these young women's race, class, gender, and experiences, and how these variables have all worked together to shape Hazel and Candy's behavior and view of themselves.

Messerschmidt (1995, 2002) argues that women involved in gangs do not reject femininity and opt for emphasized masculinity, but rather recreate their own unique type of femininity that is socio-culturally relevant. The idea of contextualization is key to this argument. That is, young women (and perhaps more importantly, young women of color) involved in gangs construct their identities in a way that makes sense within the context of their race, class, and culture. He refers to this construction as 'bad-girl femininity.' One problem with Messerschmidt's concept of 'bad-girl femininity,' is that he argues women within the gang are always striving to construct some type of femininity. It ignores the role of power structures and inequality, and how these dynamics necessarily impact the gendered actions of these young women (Miller, 2002).

During the interviews, the women noted that more traditionally feminine physical characteristics can be observed in women who tend to be at the bottom of the power-infused hierarchy that exists among women in gangs. At the bottom of the hierarchy are the women who are known as "hoodrats," "hos," and "snitches." These are women who are seen as being promiscuous (not having respect for themselves, and therefore not able to demonstrate respect for their neighborhood). They are acknowledged by the clothing they wear (provocative and revealing, traditionally associated with extreme femininity), the type and location of tattoos they exhibit, and their affect. When asked how one knows that someone is a "hoodrat" the young women responded that it was obvious by the way she "carries herself." Monique voiced her disdain for hoodrats by stating that one way in which they carry themselves differently from other women in the gang is through their interactions with male gang members. These women are known to "floss on," or, make advances towards the male gang members.

In addition to the way in which they carry themselves, hoodrats may display tattoos that advertise their sexuality. Monique stated that hoodrats have "ghetto

tattoos like ‘daddy’s playground.’ Like shit that don’t mean anything.” Tattoos with overt sexual connotations plus the strategic placement of the tattoos on these women’s bodies (such as on the lower back, known as a “tramp stamp”) cues the other women in the gang into the specific gender and sexuality being displayed.

One of the ways in which a woman earns her gendered title is the way in which she chooses to enter the gang. All of the women noted that there are two ways of entering a gang: being “jumped in” (beaten up for a certain number of seconds by gang members) or being “fucked in” (permitting a group of men to take turns having sexual intercourse with a woman. Though it is accepted as a means for entering the gang, it may not necessarily be the desired form of gang entry). If a woman opts to be “fucked in” to a gang, she will never be able to earn any higher status than “hoodrat,”

Anais, 18, stated that she earned her title by being “jumped in.” “I got that [title] ‘cuz I earned it the *right* way.” According to the young women interviewed, being “jumped in” to the gang is the way in which a girl or woman earns her initial respect. In order to continue to earn respect and thus ascend the power hierarchy, a woman must demonstrate that she is down for her homeboys, homegirls, and the hood.

### **Discussion**

The data show that there exists a unique relationship between power, identity, and gender. This idea can best be understood through the creation of a model that shows how power differentials in the ‘hood lead to strain, which in-turn works to shape identity (see Figure 2). The women explained how their racially segregated neighborhoods were afflicted by crime, violence, and poverty -- a stark contrast to the typical image of the white, middle-class neighborhood. These living conditions, which deny young women a sense of power and control over their own lives, subsequently create specific types of strain that impact all facets of these women’s lives. This existence is, as Mari stated, “like living in a black hole.”

Figure 2: Power-Strain-Gender Cycle

The only rational explanation then is that these women would want to become a part of something that provides them with a sense of belonging. Being a part of something bigger than you – whether it is a club or organization, school, a family, or a gang – has an impact on who a person is, what they believe, and their subsequent experiences. The idea of belonging therefore works to shape a person’s identity.

Shaping of identity then necessarily promotes a recreation of power. As Anais illustrated, one can ascend the power hierarchy by proving how “down” one is. Being “down” is about following orders and completing tasks to gain status and respect. The status a woman earns by being “down” directly impacts the way in which she *and* her homeboys and homegirls reconstruct her gendered identity. These women frequently compare themselves to one another and are involved in “othering.” Othering refers to the process by which people compare themselves to others and subsequently inflate their own sense of self as someone “better”. The process of othering is then responsible for a reconstruction of gendered identities (Messerschmidt, 2002).

This study contributes to the existing literature concerning Latina gang members in a large city such as Los Angeles. Some of the findings support other authors’ findings (see Messerschmidt, 1995, 2002; Moore, 1991; Portillos, 1997) regarding the development of a gendered identity. However, the findings from this study build upon other studies to help describe the cycle through which power structures impact the shaping of one’s identity. This study further elaborates on how these identities have an impact on power redistribution and subsequently on the way these women ‘do gender.’ Additionally, this analysis – without discounting the importance of homegirls’ relationships with the homeboys – seeks to explain how young women are in part responsible for the creation of their own gendered identities as a result of the unique power struggles in which they engage with one another.

There are some methodological limitations to this study. First is the use of only interviews, as opposed to triangulating data by incorporating a focus group or observations. Being able to add different types of data collection would have been a useful tool to help validate the information gained from the interviews. However, because of the women’s variable attendance at the program, a focus group and observations were not feasible.

### **Conclusion**

This study provided a look into the lives of young Latina women involved in gang life. Latina women were selected to be interviewed for this study to fill a gap given the absence of research on Latina gang members. Upon embarking on this study, we thought that being of Latina descent would have a large impact on the data outcomes. For example, we expected language and issues such as acculturation to play a major role in these women’s lives, and subsequently in their affiliation with gang life. While all of the participants were Latina, almost all (with the exception of one participant, Jenny) were second or third generation American. Few of the women actually spoke Spanish. This is consistent with Moore’s findings, which suggest that there is not a direct relationship between the strain encountered from issues surrounding immigration and gang affiliation (1991).

Despite this, these women’s level of exposure to traditional American norms, ideologies, and values remains unclear. In other words, it is possible that traditional Latino norms and values were retained in the homes in which these women were raised. Future research should investigate the role or race, language, and culture on Latina women involved in gangs.

The conditions in which Latino immigrant families are forced to live in large, urban cities in the United States leave them particularly susceptible to the stressors which lead to gang involvement, particularly economic disenfranchisement and institutional racism (i.e. unequal access to jobs that pay a living wage, unequal access to resources, and unequal access to a good education that prepares them for the

future). While being Latina may not directly correlate with gang involvement, the circumstances in which many Latino families live in the United States does, clearly, have some impact on gang affiliation. The environments in which these women are raised are geographically isolated from white, middle class neighborhoods.

Further research in this area could help us to better understand these complex relationships which are redefined through gang affiliation. Future research should focus on whether or not the current proposed model explains power-identity-gender relations upon exiting gang life. Might a different model be more appropriate or fitting to explain the experiences that take place upon leaving a gang? Additionally, it would be interesting to determine how power structures impose strain on people once they leave the gang. What type of new power relations emerge as a result? Are people faced with a different type of strain? Future research should examine how gender is further reshaped upon exiting gang life. If power relations do impact identity, and thus gender, in this population, then one might assume that an additional shift of power (exiting a gang) would further impact gender roles and sexuality.

Finally, while this study offers a glimpse into the lives of Latina gang members in the Los Angeles area, we are cautious at this point about how far the results can be generalized. The culture, poverty and ghettoized experiences these women's gangs emerged from very likely played a significant role in both how their gang experiences in general, and how their gendered gang experiences in particular, were realized. In Canada, for example, these shaping factors either do not exist or are far less pronounced. While processes of gang initiation, socialization and promotion no doubt exist, it would be interesting to see how they are manifest in this very different social context. Future comparative study may well provide an opportunity to tease out some of the ways in which race, culture, education and gender role distinction play out in the way that women do gender in the gang context.

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### Biographical Notes

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