"The Transformation of Playgroups to Street Gangs"

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Abstract
This article provides a sociological analysis of social groups, play, playgroups, street gangs and explores the variables that contribute to the transformation of playgroup participation to street gang membership. Discussion centers on the analysis of the fundamental characteristics of social groups in general and playgroups and street gangs specifically. Playgroup participation is a natural expression of our need to communally bond with others, especially with one's peers. As children age, playgroups are modified or abandoned. In their place are life path decisions that may lead individuals to a conventional life or to a life of delinquency and gang participation. With a fundamental understanding of how playgroups and street gangs operate we can attempt to explain how some playgroups transform into street gangs. It should be pointed out that in most cases it is not entire playgroups that form specific street gangs but rather it is the transformation of some playgroup participants into street gang members that is most likely to occur. Six Syracuse, New York, urban local street gangs are referenced as examples of youths who once played together in playgroups in lower socioeconomic neighborhoods but who later transformed themselves into brutal street gang members who participated in violent, criminal drug enterprises only to find themselves incarcerated for violating RICO statues.

Introduction

In August 2003 members of the notorious Boot Camp gang from the dangerous South Side of Syracuse, New York, were arrested for Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) violations. Following a federal investigation 26 Boot Camp members were charged with running a criminal enterprise for eight years by using systematic violence to control the gang's drug trade on the city's South Side (O'Brien 2003). Boot Camp was just the first of six Syracuse street gangs taken down in the first decade of the 2000s by the Federal RICO statues—statues originally designed to combat the power of organized crime syndicates (i.e., the Italian and

Russian mafias). The other five gangs arrested and prosecuted under the RICO Act were Elk Block, Brighton Brigade, 110 Gang, Bricktown, and the V-Not gang. Besides sharing the distinction of being arrested and prosecuted for federal racketeering and a slew of violent and drug offenses, all six of these Syracuse street gangs consisted of local kids who grew up together in close proximity urban neighborhoods where youths play ball and other games together. Many members of the Boot Camp gang were related to one another, primarily as cousins, or felt so close to each other that they considered themselves a family. Their home area, or "turf," is located in the neighborhood around the corner of Midland Avenue and Colvin Street (this particular intersection is considered one of the most dangerous in Syracuse). The members of the other five Syracuse street gangs previously mentioned also grew up in close proximity in the impoverished Southside.

Lacking nation gang affiliation (i.e., Bloods, Crips or Latin Kings) one has to wonder, "How did these local youngsters transform themselves from kids who formed playgroups with one another to violent street gang members?" How did youths drawing up football plays in abandon dirt fields and playing basketball in the park, evolve to gangs who orchestrated game plans that entailed systematic violent enforcement schemes designed to protect a lucrative drug trade? Under the leadership of Karo Brown, Boot Camp generated millions of dollars via its drug distribution ring, a distribution ring so elaborate that it involved trafficking millions of dollars worth of drugs to Syracuse from Canada through the Akwesasne Mohawk Reservation. Located north of Syracuse via Interstate 81, Akwesasne is the Mohawk name for the reservation that most people from the outside call the St. Regis Mohawk Reservation. As a sovereign nation, U.S. law enforcement officials have no jurisdiction on the reservation, nor do Canadian officials have jurisdiction on the reserve in Ontario and Quebec, Canada. Boot Camp worked in concert with members of the Mohawk nation to traffic drugs from Canada through the reservation to be driven to Syracuse by gang members. Boot Camp amassed such huge quantities of drugs that Syracuse became a distribution center for drugs sent to New York City, Boston and Philadelphia. To control its operation and protect its lucrative drug market Boot Camp engaged in intimidation, violent assaults, and homicide (Delaney 2014a). In 2014, years after their convictions for RICO violations, members of the Boot Camp gang, along with many of their rivals, find themselves behind prison walls.

Social Groups

There are two elements common to humans and most animal species, group formation and expressions of play. Group formation is so common that a collective noun exists for nearly all animal species. In his 2011 book *Flocks, Herds, Litters & Schools*, Jim McMullan describes a parcel of penguins, herd of elephants, school of fish, zeal of zebras, troop of lemurs, nest of hornets, pack of coyotes, flock of

seagulls, and a colony of bats among hundreds of other animal groupings. Throughout history and in every culture people have also formed collectivities for camaraderie, safety, and survival. When describing parameters of human collectivities, sociologists make distinctions between categories, aggregates and social groups.

Categories and Aggregates

The term "category" is used when describing a number of people who share a particular attribute but who may have never met. There are countless examples of categories of people including all youth athletes, street gang members, teachers, Pearl Jam fans, patrons of a particular museum, and so on. While sociology warns against making generalizations based on any particular categorical membership, a number of assumptions are made of individuals based on broad categorization traits common to those who fall within the parameters of a specific category of people. For example, while it is false to assume that street gangs are strictly a big city problem, it is true that a higher percentage of law enforcement agencies reporting gang problems are located in larger cities. For example, the Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency and Prevention (OJJDP) reported that 86.4 percent of larger cities, 51 percent of suburban counties, 32.6 percent of smaller cities, and 14.9 percent of rural counties reported gang problems in 2006 (OJJDP 2008).

An "aggregate" is a term used to describe a number of people who happen to clustered in one place at a given time—for example, at a bus stop, a shopping mall, a sporting event, or a playground. Although aggregates are a collection of people who happen to be in a specific place at a specific time, they may not share any other attribute other than, perhaps, a common purpose. People at a playground may vary a great deal based on such categorical schemes as race/ethnicity, religious convictions, political leanings, and athletic ability; however, they can be lumped as an aggregate of people who value leisure, play, and/or recreation at this particular playground. Even at a playground, however, the aggregate may have different purposes. Some may be keeping an eye on their children as they play, others may want to play basketball on the court or play Frisbee in the field, while others may go to the park to eat their lunch during their work break. Something that could unite an aggregate in purpose at a playground may involve supporting a team involved in a softball tournament or fleeing from rival gangs involved in a sudden shootout.

Characteristics of Social Groups

Sociologists are especially interested in the characteristics of social groups. A social group is defined as "two or more people who interact regularly and in a manner defined by some common purpose, a set of norms, and a structure of statuses and roles (social positions)" (Delaney 2012, 134). There are two general requirements that must be met for a collectivity of people to qualify as a social group: (1) they must

interact with one another in an organized fashion, and (2) they must identify themselves as group members because of shared views, goals, traits, or circumstances. Play groups consisting of regular gatherings of friends and/or family members as well as street gangs qualify as social groups.

The structure of social groups varies a great deal depending upon a number of group dynamic characteristics including group size, degree of intimacy, type of group leader, and level of cohesiveness. The usage of the term "social group" implies a discussion of a plurality of people and while one might think that the minimum number of members should be higher than two, sociologists recognize dyads as social groups. A *dyad* is a two-person group and the term was coined by German sociologist Georg Simmel as a way to demonstrate the significant differences between dyads and triads. The term "triad" was also coined by Simmel and refers to a three-person group. Simmel (1950) argued that the simple addition of one person to a two-person group (the transformation from a dyad to a triad) changes the dynamics of the group structure quite significantly.

Within a dyad, each group member has a shared sense of closeness as the group cannot exist without the other. The introduction of a third person modifies the group structure entirely. The addition of a third element provides the opportunity for the development of a "super individual" (one who dominates the other two) and internal divisions (Spykman 1965). The direct and immediate reciprocity found in the *dyad* is replaced by an indirect relationship in a triad. The triad is less dependent on the immediate participation of each individual as the participation of two of the three ensures the continued existence of the group even if one member leaves. The dyadic group shows synthesis and antithesis. The entrance of a third element means transition, conciliation, and renunciation both of the immediate reciprocity and of the direct opposition (Spykman, 1965).

The original dyad had an intimacy between the two persons. The introduction of a third person may threaten this intimacy. On the other hand, it may intensify the group. Thus, the third person may be viewed a nonpartisan arbitrator or mediator, thus serving the group as a whole; or, the third person may have an ulterior motive designed to heighten selfish interests. The Latin term *tertius gaudens* ("the third who enjoys") is applicable when the third person tries to position him- or herself in an advantageous manner. The third person may spontaneously seize upon the opportunity that conflict between the other two offers. He may do this because the other two conflicting elements will compete for the third person's favor and therefore gain power of the group. Finally, the third person may implement a strategy known as *divide et impera*, Latin for "divide and rule" or "divide and conquer" (Delaney 2014b). According to Simmel (1950), this occurs when the third element intentionally produces conflict in order to gain a dominating position. The third person may do this in order to maintain power over the group, or if she has plans to ally herself with one of the original two members and then remove the other member.

Since the complexity of a group becomes so different between dyads and triads simply because of the addition of one member, it follows that even larger groups become increasingly complicated as their size increases. While established playgroups are small in number they become increasingly dynamic any time a new member joins them. Street gangs, on the other hand, are much larger than playgroups and can range in size from dozens to thousands. As is the case with all large groups, street gangs tend to establish a hierarchy, sub-groups, and clearly defined roles for individual members. Playgroups, on the other hand, while generally possessing an informal leader, are not nearly as complicated as street gangs.

From a sociological perspective, one of the best ways to identify the degree of intimacy found within a group is through the distinction between primary and secondary groups (people whom we interact with impersonally and without a strong personal connection). American sociologist Charles Horton Cooley described primary groups as "those characterized by intimate face-to-face association and cooperation…The result of intimate association…is a certain fusion of individualities in a common whole, so that one's very self, for many purposes at least, is the common life and purpose of the group" (Cooley 1909, 23). Cooley explains that humans are initially bound to individual self-interests but through the socialization process we learn to see that our true role is to help the whole or collective primary group. Cooley's idea of the primary group was influenced by William Graham Sumner's (1906) distinction between an "in-group" and the "out-group" (to be discussed in further detail later in this article). This in-group and out-group distinction leads to an "us" versus "them" mentality that is very evident in many groups and especially with street gangs. Play groups, conversely are not nearly, if at all, antagonistic toward one another unless they covet limited public resources (e.g., a basketball court or video games at a mall).

Social groups are also characterized by individuals who occupy any of several social positions, referred to by sociologists as statuses. Typically, sociologists distinguish between two types of status: ascribed status and achieved status. An ascribed status is any status a person receives at birth such as their race/ethnicity, ancestry, or gender. Because ascribed statuses are assigned at birth, we cannot generally alter them. There are a few exceptions to this as someone might "change" his or her gender. An achieved status is any status that a person attains or earns through individual effort, choice, or competition (Delaney 2012). Each of us possesses many statuses and, in every case, there are corresponding expectations of behavior associated with each social position held. Sociologists refer to such cultural expectations as social roles. A social role may be viewed as entailing culturally determined rights, duties, and expectations associated with specific social positions; they are like scripts or understandings about what behavior is appropriate within specific situations.

As this brief look at the structure of social groups indicates there are many dynamic components to consider when examining playgroups and street gangs specifically. In the following discussion, we will look at the characteristics of play and playgroups and follow that with a brief review of the characteristics of a street gang.

Play and Play Groups

An expression of play is the second element (along with group formation) common to most animal species. Most of us have witnessed puppies and kittens among other animals playfully engaging one another and we have certainly observed children at play. Animals play for many of the same reasons as humans. According to Pellis, Pellis and Bell (2010), there are three leading reasons why animals play. First, play is multifunctional; that is, play has "more than one adaptive benefit, and any given species may evidence some, all, or none of the benefits" (Pellis, Pellis and Bell 2010, 279). Second, the benefits gained from play participation (e.g., development of motor skills), may be either immediate or delayed (p. 279). Third, play is an activity that is "engaged in only after all other needs are met, so the opportunity to engage in this behavior can vary with food availability and with other environmental stressors, both physical and biological" (Pellis, Pellis, and Bell 2010, 280).

Each of us can reflect upon our own play activities and playgroups of our youth and examine the benefits of playful behaviors. As adults we tend to have less time for play because we have to fulfill individual, family and societal needs and obligations. Fulfilling these needs and obligations help to make us positive contributing members of society. In order to meet these needs it is necessary for the vast majority of us to work and the more time we work the less time we have for play. It is this realization that helps establish a number of parameters of play beginning with the idea that unlike work, play represents an absence of obligated time and that play is an activity that is performed voluntarily during leisure.

Play

Play is one of many activities performed during one's leisure time and play itself refers to a wide range of actions and possesses many characteristics. "Play is an enjoyable experience deriving from behavior which is self-initiated in accordance with personal goals or expressive impulses; it tolerates all ranges of movement abilities; its rules are spontaneous; it has a temporal sequence but no predetermined ending; it results in no tangible outcome, victory or reward" (Snyder and Spreitzer, 1978, 12). One merely has to conjure an image of child who can find the same, if not more, enjoyment from playing with an oversized empty cardboard box than with the toy inside it to understand the characteristics of play. "Play provides an opportunity to temporarily shelve reality and thus find one's inner self again" (Hellendoorn, van

der Kooij, and Sutton-Smith, 1994, 25). In his review of theories of human play, Thomas Henricks (2008) reports that play is associated with "the freedom of human beings to express themselves openly and to render creatively the conditions of their lives. In that sense, play is often considered to be a respite from the necessities of life, a stretch in time when normal affairs of the world are suspended" (p.159).

Peter Gray (2008), who has written a series of articles on the value of play for *Psychology Today*, puts forth the idea that play for the human species provides the means by children to develop their physical, intellectual, emotional, social and moral capacities. Gray (2008) contends that play "is the means of creating and preserving friendships. It also provides a state of mind that, in adults as well as children, is uniquely suited for high-level reasoning, insightful problem solving, and all sorts of creative endeavors." Gray (2008) believes that play has five characteristics:

- Play activities are freely engaged in and are self-directed, that is, players are always free to quit
- Play activity values the means more than the ends
- Play activity has elements of structure, or rules, but these rules are made up by the participants themselves; they are not formalized rules
- Play is imaginative, not literally imaginative but rather, the activity is the result of creative constructs of the participants
- Play is active fun, free from the stress of competition.

Allen Guttmann (1988), who is among the leading early sport sociologists, describes two types of play: spontaneous play and organized play (games and sports). Spontaneous play involves voluntary participation with flexible rules and plenty of room for innovation. For example, at a family gathering the younger children may be given 4 or 5 strikes instead of the customary 3 when playing baseball or they may be allowed to reach first base even if the fielder caught the ball making them "out." An adult pitcher may throw with the non-dominant hand in another attempt to even things out between the participants. In organized baseball no such allowances are made for competitors who have inferior skill sets compared to others. It is also fairly common in spontaneous play to allow for "do-overs"—repeating the play for any number of reasons including such situations as the batter claiming, "I wasn't ready for the pitch." Recreational activities such as running and swimming with a friend is a type of spontaneous play. As Nixon and Frey (1996) explain, recreation is an activity designed to refresh the mind or body, it is not intended to be a form of competition against others. When play becomes more serious, more organized, we have the beginnings of competitive contests. There are two general categories of competitive contests—intellectual (e.g., chess) and nonphysical contests (e.g., board games such as Monopoly) and physical contests (sports) (Guttmann, 1988; Delaney and Madigan 2009).

Characteristics of Playgroups

Playgroups are an example of a social group. The size of any given playgroup is nearly always quite small, rendering the earlier discussion on dyads and triads quite significant. Two youths at play will simply roll with the flow of action, usually feeding off of each other's lead. When one of them makes a suggestion the other generally quickly agrees as to keep living in the spontaneous moment of fun and excitement. Each member of the dyad playgroup has a great deal of power as the other realizes both participants are needed in order for the playgroup to continue. When a third child joins the playgroup all sorts of new scenarios may arrive. Ideally, the three play as one group, one mind, with having fun is always the primary concern. The third participant, however, may cause riffs and dissension in the group. Children who participate in playgroups of 3 or more quickly begin to learn valuable life skills that will serve them well in the future. Playgroups participants begin to learn, for example, that others might have completely different perspectives on what constitutes fun. They also realize that some people don't play fair and that some individuals are more demanding than others. Some people are good sports win or lose and others throw temper tantrums when they lose. Playgroup participation provides a potentially wide variety of valuable growing experiences.

As for the degree of intimacy component of a social group, playgroups generally consist of primary group participants; that is, close friends or family members such as siblings or cousins. School classmates at play during recess in school provide us with an example of the distinction between primary and secondary groups, as close friends will form smaller primary playgroups while the class as a collective has a secondary group feel to it. There are occasions when children form playgroups spontaneously without knowing each other. This could happen at the doctor's office while children are waiting to see the doctor but play with other children in the waiting room. Sometimes, parents set up "play dates" for their children so that they can socialize with one another. Spontaneous or forced playgroup associations may or may not work out as all children do not necessarily get along with each other at all times. In nearly all cases, however, playgroups are not antagonistic toward other playgroups; that is, there is no sense of in-group vs. out-group rivalry as may be the case with other types of primary and secondary groups.

The level of cohesiveness in a playgroup is generally high as play is an activity freely engaged in by all participants. For as long as participants continue to have fun, the playgroup will stay intact. Once participants no longer have fun, or grow older, they may go their separate ways. In some cases, members of an aging playgroup may seek kicks and thrills from more grown-up activities, including acts of delinquency that eventually lead to turning to a street gang.

Street Gangs

Street gangs represent another type of social group. While street gangs may vary in their level of complexity, it is safe to say that even the most loosely organized street gangs are more complex than playgroups. The more highly structured gangs come closer to operating as formal organizations and possess such shared characteristics as predesigned social action/activity and limits on individual behavior; a high degree of integration; structured norms and values; a strong system of social control with designated sanctions (punishments for violating gang norms); the use of symbols and secrecy; the idea of protecting turf/territory is fundamental; disdain toward and competition with various out-groups (rivals); and, performing ritualistic behavior.

What is a Street Gang?

Establishing clear-cut parameters as to which groups of delinquents and criminals qualify as a street gang is relatively difficult. The validity of the previous statement is exemplified by the fact that there is no universally accepted definition of street gangs used by law enforcement jurisdictions across the United States (and in other nations), gang researchers, or gangbangers themselves. Having studied street gangs for years, including conducting my own research on gang members, I use a definition that incorporates the ideas of many other researchers, law enforcement agencies, along with ideas influenced by personal street gang interactions: A street gang is a group of individuals whose core members interact with one another frequently; they possess an identifying group name; generally wear certain types of similar clothing specific to their gang; can usually be identified by specific colors; are most likely to claim a neighborhood (or turf) or marketplace; and often engage in violent, criminal, or other delinquent behavior" (Delaney 2014a, 8).

Some street gangs are very large and spread across multiple neighborhoods, regions, states and/or nations. Street gang members may be referred to as gangbangers or gangsters. Terms such as "posse," "set," or "crew," are used to describe smaller subsets, or affiliates, of the original gang. Participating in gang activity is known as gangbanging behavior. Criminal gang activity refers specifically to gang-based crime while the term "gang-related crime" is used if either the criminal or the victim is a gang member.

The contrast in the organizational component of street gangs can be substantial. Some gangs, such as the Vice Lords, based out of Chicago but found in numerous states, are highly structured. The Vice Lords have an administrative body called the "board" designed to deal with all matters that affect the entire Vice Lord nation (all of the affiliated sets spread across the United States) and they hold regular meetings with representatives from all the sets. Vice Lord gangsters are given printed membership cares with the gang's insignia (a rabbit wearing a top hat, cane, and white gloves) (Delaney 2014a). From an organizational perspective, the Vice Lords are one of the closest street gangs to operate like a formal sports team. Nation

gangs—those found in multiple states—such as the Crips, Bloods, People, and Folks, as well as the transnational gangs—those who operate a criminal enterprise in multiple countries—of Mara Salvatrucha (aka La Mara Salvatrucha or MS-13) and the 18th Street Gang (aka M-18) are also highly organized. In contrast, rural, suburban and local urban street gangs are generally more loosely organized. The Boot Camp, gang along with the other Syracuse gangs described at the beginning of this article, represent an example of less structured gangs. That Boot Camp was able to run a highly efficient criminal drug enterprise despite its relatively small membership is a testament to the organizational skills of their gang leader Karo Brown as well as the willpower of the gang members to strive for its extrinsic rewards goal of (seemingly) endless amounts of cash.

Characteristics of Street Gangs

Even the smallest of street gangs are larger in size than playgroups. Rural and suburban gangs may be as small as a dozen or so members. Local urban street gangs—those with no "nation" gang affiliation and generally found in smaller cities such as Syracuse—will have dozens of members. Boot Camp, for example, consisted of just 26 core members when they were arrested for RICO violations in 2003. Other local urban street gangs may consist of more than 100 members. Nation gangs have thousands of members scattered across numerous sets. It is estimated that there are 15,000 Crips in Los Angeles and more than 45,000 Crips spread across the nation. The Bloods have over 20,000 members nationwide. The Vice Lords, a member of The People Nation have nearly 20,000 members in Chicago alone. The transnational gang 18th Street (also known as M-18) has 20,000 members in its home base of Los Angeles and additional 20-25,000 members throughout the United States and other parts of the world (primarily in Mexico and Central America) (Delaney 2014a). Suffice it to say, street gangs are much larger in number than playgroups and the largest street gangs have memberships that reaches or exceed entire professional sports leagues.

In his classic 1906 publication *Folkways*, William Graham Sumner made a distinction between "in-groups" (or "we-groups") and "out-groups" (or "others-group"). Sumner (1906) described the we-group, or in-group, as the people we are close to and have loyalty toward, while the out-groups consist of people that are not close to and often show hostility toward (pp. 12-13). This distinction is similar to the contemporary and common notion of the "us" versus "them" mentality and is especially applicable to street gangs whether they are small or large. The vast majority of street gang members clearly identify their gang affiliation (through a variety of visible means including wearing specific colors, tattoos, and hand gestures) whenever they cross paths with others believed to be rival gang members. In this regard, they are proclaiming themselves as an "us" or "we" group. In an effort to establish clear boundaries between "us" and "them" gang members are known to

always "represent"—meaning they are to proudly identify their gang allegiance. In turn, their rivals will represent their gang allegiance, a move that clearly establishes an "us" versus "them" scenario. Street gangs are on constant guard for intruders to their turf as the cliché of "If you aren't one of us, you're one of them" is certainly applicable in the gang world. Violence is often a by-product of representing gang affiliation. In contrast, while playgroup members may identify themselves as an "in-group" compared to other playgroups ("out-groups"), it is usually accomplished in a non-threatening and non-violent manner. That is to say, playgroups rarely engage in open hostility toward one another.

The importance of "representing" oneself as a specific gang member reinforces the degree of intimacy within the gang among its members. The like-minded mentality of gangs also assures compliance to a code of expected behavior. The closing of ranks among like-minded gang members is an important element in securing the intimacy of the gang. The degree of intimacy among fellow gang members is correlated to the size of the gang. It would be impossible for all 20,000 members of the Los Angeles 18th Street Gang to have intimate knowledge of one another. In fact, it is highly unlikely that most members have ever met all their associates. This does not mean there is a complete lack of intimacy among the members as their use of common rituals and symbols serves as a unifying force in mutual identification. Despite this loose affiliation of common identification shared by gang members of large gangs they still qualify as a secondary group. However, in every large gang there exists a core group of gang members that organize activities and maintain order within the ranks while finding ways to successfully battle rival gangs. These core members of the larger gang represent a primary group.

The degree of intimacy among gang members is much stronger in smaller gangs. Local urban street gangs, such as those found in Syracuse, are characterized by an association wherein members are generally quite close with one another as they have grown up together on the same street, block or housing project. They may also share familial association. As a result, local urban street gangs in their entirety generally represent a primary group.

Maintaining a high level of cohesiveness is often a daunting task in any organization including street gangs. To achieve cohesiveness, gang members engage in a great deal of ritualistic behaviors including wearing identifying colors and clothing, participating in rites of passage ceremonies, using symbolic communication, and so on. Commitment to group goals is another key component of cohesiveness. A strong leader helps tremendously in establishing cohesiveness. "A gang leader is usually a longtime member who has climbed the ranks and is generally looked up to be other members. The stereotype of the gang leader as someone who is tough, possesses a long criminal history, and holds a strong influence over members is an accurate portrayal of most gang leaders" (Delaney 2014a, 144-145). In smaller gangs, such as those found in Syracuse, the leader and any number of

immediate entrusted higher status members will maintain cohesiveness through a consolidation of power. The leader of Boot Camp, Karo Brown, rose through the ranks of his gang. He was both violent and cunning. Brown's fellow gangsters admired his charismatic leadership skills and his drive to earn the gang millions of dollars. His close attention to details and task-oriented approach qualifies Brown as an instrumental leader. Instrumental leaders such as Brown often adopt an authoritarian style of leadership because they find it a prudent means of achieving set goals.

Other gang leaders will find it necessary to adopt an expressive style of leadership. This may especially be the case with larger gangs as the leader must find a way to stay on track with the gang's goals but also find a way to keep all the individual gang sets happy with one another. The expressive leader encourages input from other top ranking members. Larger street gangs, then, will require a leader that oversees a relatively complex hierarchy of power that consists of many social positions and corresponding social statutes. The higher up the hierarchal ladder the more prestigious the position and status. At the bottom of the hierarchy are the youngest, least experienced members who will have little status within the gang. A prevalent feature of the gang hierarchy is the idea of promotion based on merit. That is, one's achieved status—usually earned during battle with rival gangs—is quickly recognized and acknowledged by leaders. In the world of street gangs, achievement, more often than not, leads to promotion.

While street gangs have a clear-cut leader and a hierarchy of authoritarian leadership, playgroups tend to be more loosely organized. Nonetheless, even in playgroups it is often necessary for at least one member to try and organize gatherings of group members and group activities; thus, a leader of sorts will emerge. The leader may be the person who is most admired or most popular, or the person who provides the playgroup environment (e.g., the playroom or backyard where the playgroup meets), or provides the playgroup resources (e.g., toys, video games, swimming pool). Unlike street gang members, however, playgroup members enjoy a higher level of freedom and are essentially free to participate in any given activity or not to participate.

Factors in the Transformation Process

The review of social groups, elements of play, street gang characteristics and playgroup characteristics provided in this article utilized a compare and contrast element in order to help foreshadow how the transformation process of some playgroup members to street gang members occurs. We will now examine the role of socialization and socioeconomic variables that help to influence the transformation process in general and the Syracuse gangs that were indicted for RICO violations more specifically.

The Role of Socialization

The sociological perspective emphasizes the role of socialization as a prime factor in shaping human behavior. "Socialization is a process of social development and learning that occurs as individuals interact with one another and learn about society's expectations for acceptable behavior" (Delaney 2014a, 164). From the time each of us were born and continuing throughout our lives, we are exposed to cultural expectations of acceptable behavior by agents of socialization, chief among them: parents and close family members, peers, schools, the media, religion, employers, and the government. When we are young, family members and close friends—our primary groups—are especially influential on our behavior. The primary group connection becomes an important factor in the transformation from playgroups to street gangs in many neighborhoods as playgroup membership is also highlighted by a high degree of intimacy as associates know each other quite well. In many cases playgroups may consist of family members such as siblings and cousins. Cousins are often the first friends for many youths as peers will never understand your family as well as cousins. The youths who grew up together in the neighborhood that would spawn the Boot Camp gang consisted of members who had intimate knowledge of one another, including cousins. As we grow the socialization process continues with school experiences, influences from the mass media (e.g., rap music and video games that glorifies gang activities), and the weight of other agents of socialization who increasingly shape our perspectives on life and ultimately influence our behavior and life choices.

Choosing a Path in Life

Each of us has the ability to think and choose from a wide variety of courses of actions, or paths in life. Sociologists would remind us, however, that our life choices are influenced by our group memberships and the institutions of the social structure in which we live. For example, some children grow up in families where they are encouraged to go to school, earn good grades, go on to college, and find a good-paying career. In many cases, these same children will receive financial support from their parents, or guardians. Children from wealthier families may have careers waiting for them in a family business whenever they are ready to assume the responsibility of holding down a steady job. Some youth from lower socioeconomic status (SES) families, in contrast, may come view their chances of getting ahead in life far more limited and as a result, they come to see the gang as a way out of economic despair.

The vast majority of all street gangs come from lower SES backgrounds, especially those found in high-crime, urban areas. As a result, gang researchers and social policymakers have identified a number of socioeconomic factors that impact on an individual's decision to join a gang. These factors include the shifting labor market (from manufacturing to service jobs which often require advanced

education); the development of an underclass (censuses track neighborhoods where the poverty rate exceeds 40 percent); poverty and the feminization of poverty (most gang members come from single-parent families headed by women and women have a higher poverty rate than men); the breakdown of the nuclear family (lack of a male role model is often cited as a contributing factor for why young males turn to gangs); lack of a quality education in many urban schools (high school dropouts will earn far less money over their lifetimes than any other category of persons based on education level); and, the gang's offering of acceptances, protection, and survival (something all gang members search for and desire). The scope of this paper is too limited to go into detail on all these topics but suffice it to say, many adolescents in lower SES neighborhoods come to view their life chances as very limited. If their parents are around, and if they are working, youth see them struggle just to try to make ends meet. Furthermore, many of these youths become disenchanted with the middle class ideology of delayed gratification (in terms of socioeconomic success) and opt to find immediate material success. For many youth in lower SES neighborhoods the local street gang is viewed as the best option for immediate gratification.

Juvenile Delinquency and Street Gangs

Children form playgroups at very young ages and chances are by age 7 they have participated in a playgroup they regularly meets. Age 7 is also relevant for our discussion on juvenile delinquency as the law considers children 7 and under too young to be held accountable for any criminal acts they may commit (Champion 2004). They are not held accountable primarily because they are considered too young to understand the meaning and consequence of criminal behavior. In most states, by the time one reaches age 8 they can be held responsible for criminal acts. However, youths younger than age 18 will be treated as juvenile offenders, a classification that brings with it more lenient punishments for violating the law than it does when compared to adults who commit the same crime. While some states may adjust the ages considered as a juvenile the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) Uniform Crime Reports Program considers any person under the age of 18, but over age 7, as a juvenile (U.S. Department of Justice 2010). Thus, when it comes to the law, we have a "juvenile" category that generally involves 7- to 17-year-olds. Delinquency refers to violations of juvenile law by juveniles and involves a wide variety of violations ranging from minor offenses, such as drinking and truancy, to more serious violations, such as assault and homicide. The primary concern with juvenile delinquency and street gangs rests with the realization that most individuals committed acts of juvenile delinquency before they joined the gang.

Many juveniles have little more responsibility than to go to school and earn good grades and as a result, they have a lot of free, unobligated time on their hands. This gap in time must be filled with positive pursuits, such as sport participation, or youth may become tempted to engage in deviant, delinquent and criminal behavior. Many

youth do not fill their leisure time in a productive manner as evidenced by the high amount of juvenile crime in the United States. The OJJDP tracks crime committed by youths between the ages of 10 and 17 years of age. In 2009, the OJJDP (2011) estimated that there were 1.9 million juvenile arrests. The OJJDP (2011) reports that there were 5,804 arrests for every 100,000 youths ages 10 through 17 in the United States. There were 262 arrests for the "violent crime index" offenses (murder and nonnegligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault) for every 100,000 youth between 10 and 17 years of age. The OJJDP (2011) reports that in 2009 juvenile arrests included: 85,900 violent crime index; 417,700 property crime index (e.g., burglary, larceny-theft, motor vehicle theft, arson); and over 1.4 million nonindex offenses (e.g., other assaults, forgery, prostitution, drug abuse violations, gambling, disorderly conduct, vagrancy, curfew and loitering, and runaways).

We can conclude that there is a great deal of juvenile crime being committed by a large number of juvenile delinquents. While it is important to emphasize that not all juvenile delinquents are gang members nor are all juvenile delinquents destined to become gang members, nearly all members of street gangs "turned" while they were youths. "Turning" is the term used to describe the point wherein a person becomes a gang member, usually following an initiation; although some gang researchers argue that "turning" takes place as soon as the individual decides he or she wants to become a gang member. Turning is a key element of the transformation process as the youth has left the innocence associated with play to the deviance and criminality of gang life. Turning during one's youth is so common that data analysis of reporting law enforcement agencies indicate that roughly 40 percent of all gang members are youths (National Gang Center 2009). Juveniles are recruited by street gangs because the older gangbangers are well aware of the juvenile status "loophole" in criminal law. The gangs have the younger members do a great deal of the grunt work (e.g., running drugs, committing minor offenses) for the gang because they will face lighter penalties if they are apprehended and prosecuted by law enforcement.

For the youth who has become hardened by the perceived hopelessness of his socioeconomic standing, joining the gang seems like a good choice. This once, relatively carefree youth, who was consumed with play and games and happily dreamed of better things to come, is now a grim, guarded, violent, and dangerous gangster. Transformation is now fully engaged.

Syracuse Street Gangs and Transformation

The discussion above illustrated the key components in the transformation process of youths who were once engaged in play via playgroups to gang membership. The six Syracuse street gangs brought down by RICO statues in the first decade of the 2000s fit this profile. With a population of 144,170 in 2012 (U.S. Census Bureau 2013), Syracuse is New York's fourth-largest city and like any city of significant size, it has rough, urban neighborhoods where violence is common and

drug deals often end with murder. Based on U.S. Census Bureau (2013) data, 56 percent of city residents are white, non-Hispanic; 29.5 percent are black; 8.3 percent are Hispanic/Latino; 5.6 percent are Asian; and the rest are Native American or other. A glaring statistic of 33.6 percent of city residents living below the poverty level factors into the gang presence in Syracuse, especially the lower SES neighborhoods of the Southside. (Note: Such a high rate of poverty in the Southside could qualify these neighborhoods as an "underclass.") The median household income for Syracuse is $31,459 compared to $57,683 for the state of New York (U.S. Census Bureau 2013). There are 25 identified street gangs operating in Syracuse, with an estimated total gang membership around 1,500 (Delaney 2014a).

Street gangs have been in existence in Syracuse since at least the early 1960s and have historically been generally loosely organized and confined to mostly lower level crimes and violence. As with many jurisdictions across the United States, the crack epidemic of the 1980s changed this as Syracuse gangs slowly become more violent and organized in an effort to capitalize on the money that could be earned selling crack and other recreational drugs. Although the Latin Kings have a long presence in Syracuse, by the end of the 1990s, local street gangs took control of the tough streets of Syracuse's Southside—an area location for most of the city's street gangs. The Southside gangs are predominately black, while the Hispanic gangs reside on the near Westside. (In recent years, Hispanic street gangs, such as the Highland gang can be found on the north side of the city.) In 1997, two dominant gangs emerged in the Southside, Boot Camp and the 110 Gang. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, Boot Camp claims the neighborhood around the intersection of Midland and Colvin Streets while the 110 Gang claims the area around nearby Bellevue Avenue and Rich Street. The numerous confrontations between these two gangs have led to murder, retaliation murder, and a vicious cycle of continuous revenge shootings and violence.

The members of the Boot Camp gang, as well as the other Southside gangs, followed the pattern of so many street gangs that preceded and followed them; that is, they were first members of a playgroup before they transformed themselves into a violent, criminal enterprise. The documentation of this transformation process can be traced back to Fredric Thrasher's landmark study on street gangs dating back to the 1920s. As Thrasher (1963/1927) stated, "A characteristic which may be regarded as typical of all gangs, as distinguished from more formal groups, is its spontaneous and unplanned origin" (p.40). Gang researchers have been using the term "spontaneous" ever since Thrasher's studies were first published in 1927 to help explain the origin of street gangs. The spontaneous transformation process recognizes the fact that ties of friendship that link gang members to one another rests with the realization that many gang members knew each other (playgroups) before joining the gang.

Most of the Boot Camp gang members were still youths playing in their Southside neighborhood during the early 1990s when the gang's original members formed the Fernwood Boot Camp led by Tyree "Cav" or "Caviar" Allen in honor of the Hip Hop band Boot Camp Clik. The younger youths in this neighborhood had grown up observing and learning the ways of the streets and thirsted for the opportunity to make money like Fernwood. The Fernwood Gang referred to these playgroup youths as "Little Boot Camp" and did not view them as a threat. However, "Little Boot Camp" was led by a very cunning, street-smart, and ambitious youth named Karo Brown. Brown organized his cousins and close friends into a far more violent crew than Fernwood. They were known to march around their neighborhood chanting, "We're Boot Camp" as a means of intimidation (Shepperd 2012). Brown's crew always carried guns and battled Fernwood. Shortly after a series of gun battles, Brown's crew rose to the top and those who survived Fernwood united with Brown to form Boot Camp. The Fernwood crew survivors were honored with the distinction as *Original Gangsters* (OG). Brown then shifted the attention of Boot Camp to making money via selling, distributing and trafficking in drugs. They were not afraid to murder anyone who tried to challenge them. Inevitably, the gang became so powerful and lucrative that local officials called in the FBI, leading to the RICO arrests and ultimate prosecutions of 24 members of Boot Camp.

Other street gangs in the Southside attempted to duplicate the financial success of Boot Camp. The Elk Block gang, who resided in a neighborhood just to the east of Boot Camp, was the first to rise to power and take control of the Southside drug market following the arrests of key Boot Camp members. Elk Block operates on McKinley Ave, Elk St., and South Salina Street, and like Boot Camp, consists of local youths who grew up together. Elk Block's activities were well known by the Syracuse's Gang Violence Task Force. This Task Force worked cooperatively with state and federal officials to bring Elk Block down. Federal authorities first targeted Elk Block after the gang imported 70 guns from Georgia for an anticipated battle with Boot Camp (*The Post Standard* 2009). In July 2005, 16 of the most long-term violent members of Elk Block were indicted on RICO charges, 11 pleaded guilty and five were found guilty at trial (Syracuse Police Department 2012).

As anyone who studies street gangs closely can tell you, making arrests of a street gang that controls the drug market does not eliminate the drug problem, it simply creates opportunity for another gang. It was the Brighton Brigade who took charge after Elk Block. The Brighton Brigade reside in a much larger neighborhood than Boot Camp or Elk Block claiming Cannon St., W. Lafayette Ave., and W. Brighton Ave., located to the south of their two rival predecessors. Residents of this neighborhood had long complained to police about this gang and their openly dealing of drugs between Brighton Avenue and Cannon Street all the way up to McKinley-Brighton School. Carolyn Stanley, a 16-year resident of the Brighton neighborhood, proclaimed that all the residents were afraid for their lives and that she was afraid for

her four adopted children who like to play football and basketball outside or sit on the front porch. Stanley informed reporters of The Post Standard that her boys had been jumped on several occasions by gang members as a means of intimidation (Ramirez III and Lee 2006, A-4). Stanley's concerns reflect an important aspect of how the transformation process occurs as children who play in playgroups and try to remain neutral (no gang affiliation) are indirectly (observing what goes on in the neighborhood) and directly (via recruitment acts of intimidation) influenced by gang members and their activities. In 2006, 14 members of the Brighton Brigade gang were arrested and pleaded guilty to a variety of RICO violations including possession of firearms, crack cocaine, bullet proof vest, and so on (Ramirez III and Lee 2006).

Waiting in the wings for their turn at the top, the 110 Gang finally rose to take control of the drug trade. The 110 Gang originates from a relatively small neighborhood in the Southside to the northwest (Bellevue Ave. and Rich St.) of their rivals. Their reign lasted a few years until 2009 when 12 members were indicted on RICO violations for engaging as a criminal enterprise responsible for the distribution of controlled substances and for preserving, protecting and expanding its territory through the use of intimidation, violence, threats of violence, assault, attempted murders and murders (USDC 2009; Delaney 2014a). The next local street gang to rise to the top was the Bricktown Gang with a home base located along Salina Street to the west and Interstate 81 to the east, from Burt St. to the north and W. Colvin St. on the South. The four previous gangs busted by RICO violations all involved violence between rival gang members, but Bricktown too the lives of two innocent people, one of them a 20-month old baby. The publicity generated in Syracuse about this case led to the arrest of 14 members of Bricktown in 2011 and their prosecution by November 2012. The last gang (to date) arrested in Syracuse under RICO statues was the V-Not gang. V-Not is a reference to their Southside territory with the "V" for Valley Drive, which goes through the heart of the V-Not neighborhood (which ends at West Seneca Turnpike in the south and reaches West Newall Street as the northern border. In 2012, 11 members of V-Not were indicted on charges of murder, robbery, drug-trafficking, and witness tampering (O'Brien 2012).

The six Syracuse urban street gangs all followed the pattern of spontaneity describe long ago by Thrasher as each of these gangs arose from kids who knew each other from playgroups and who then opted to form a gang for many of the previously described reasons gang transformation takes hold. These six Syracuse gangs prosecuted under RICO represent just one example of a law enforcement jurisdiction that has had to address the issue of playgroup participation transformation into street gang membership. This transformation process occurs across the United States in numerous law enforcement jurisdictions.

Summary

This article provided a sociological analysis of social groups, playgroups, street gangs and the transformation process that youth experience as they age from small group participation centered on activities of play and games to participation in larger, violence-prone, criminal street gangs. Generally speaking, young children who, under the law, are too young to be considered capable of committing, or more precisely, incapable of understanding the meaning of, crime have already participated in playgroups by age 7. Forming playgroups is a natural expression of our need to communally bond with others, especially with one's peers. As children age, playgroups are modified or abandoned. In their place are life paths that may lead toward a conventional life that in the long-run will lead to a productive and hopefully happy life, while other paths lead to a road of delinquency. But even if one chooses the path of juvenile delinquency, there is still hope of a better life as many productive members of society today were once juvenile delinquents. However, the juvenile delinquent may choose to continue with a life of crime, a life choice that may involve joining a gang. Choosing the gang life routinely ends in premature death or a life that includes many years of incarceration. Such was the case for the street gang members from the six Syracuse urban street gangs that were arrested under RICO statues.

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