

St. Louis Gang Violence and the Code of the Street

by

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Abstract

While crime in general has been decreasing in St. Louis, Missouri, gang violence appears to be on the rise in select areas. This paper traces the cause of gang violence in St. Louis by examining it through the deviant subcultures criminological theory of crime. Ultimately, gang violence in St. Louis is a natural consequence of marginalized residents of high poverty neighborhoods internalizing oppositional values and behaviors reflected in Elijah Anderson's code of the street, which posits that violence is a necessary tool to obtain status and respect when such is not possible through conventional means.

Gang violence in St. Louis, Missouri is not new. One does not have to look far to find media accounts describing homicides and other violent gang activities on a frighteningly regular basis. While crime in general has been declining for some time nationwide, including violent crime, gang crime persists in St. Louis. Gang crime thrives in economically depressed, structurally disadvantaged areas of St. Louis. A lack of job opportunities, educational opportunities, and a mistrust of law enforcement paint a dismal picture for the area's residents. Throughout such neighborhoods, all residents must be mindful that things can often turn violent quickly. (Yacinno & McNeill, 2013). Accordingly, most would not question the finding that the hallmark of St. Louis gangs is violence (Curry & Decker, 2003).

Given the violent nature of St. Louis gangs, the question is often presented as to why gang members commit violent acts. While criminologists continue to debate the primary causal factors related to gang violence, this paper will focus on the first, and still one of the leading perspectives espoused to explain gang behavior, cultural deviance theory. Part I of this paper will begin with a brief overview of the cultural deviance theory. Part II of this paper will briefly trace the development of the cultural deviance theory, touching upon the work of some of the most influential cultural deviance theorists, with specific attention to applying

relevant concepts to gang violence in St. Louis. Finally, Part III of this paper will discuss gang violence through the lens of contemporary cultural deviance theory, espoused by Elijah Anderson, and apply it to gang violence in St. Louis.

Part I – Overview

Deviant subculture theories contend that crime and violence are the result of the acceptance or adoption of norms and values oppositional to mainstream society and thus, accept and utilize violence as a way of resolving disputes. Individuals who adopt these values are much more likely to engage in violent activities than individuals that do not adopt such values, and living in an area rife for the development of such norms translates to vulnerable citizens and opportunities to join gangs. The environments where deviant subcultures exist often encourage or perpetuate such values because those individuals that follow them are respected and those that do not are shunned (Kennedy & Baron, 1993).

PART II – Development of Cultural Deviance Theory

Albert Cohen

In *Delinquent Boys*, Albert Cohen first explained gang crime as a result of delinquent subcultures (Siegel, 2014). Cohen found that gangs followed or subscribed to values contrary than those proposed by conventional society. The subcultures to which gang members subscribed not only contradicted those of conventional society, but supported criminal activities and were hostile to authority. Cohen observed that most gang crime and supporting values occurred most often in deteriorated urban areas. These subcultural values are passed down to children living in those areas, which then perpetuates criminal activities from one generation to the next (Lilly, Cullen, & Ball, 2011).

Cohen noted that many of the disadvantaged youth living in depressed urban areas were unable to achieve success through conventional means. Essentially, Cohen found that many of these disadvantaged youths would not be able to achieve status as it is conventionally defined. Such kids, for instance, faced major disadvantages compared to middle class children, with regard to success in school (Lilly, Cullen, & Ball, 2011). They were not able to live up to the standards set by school officials, middle class measuring rods, upon which they were evaluated. Because these children were evaluated against standards for which they are poorly equipped to meet, they experienced a negative label which further diminished their chances for achieving status (Siegel, 2014). As a result disadvantaged youth often coped by revolting against conventional standards and developing their own standards, for which they were more likely to achieve success. Such standards often included violence and toughness (Brezina, Agnew, Cullen, & Wright, 2004).

When a juvenile rejects conventional values and adopts deviant subcultural values, Cohen found that they would typically follow three possible paths. First, the juvenile may take on the path of the “corner boy.” Here, the juvenile is marked by petty crimes such as drug abuse and status offenses. Such a juvenile will, rather than attempting to live up to conventional values, reject those values and retreat away from them. In that retreat, the juvenile will typically stay within the community, marry, and hold a low paying wage job (Siegel, 2014).

Alternatively, upon rejection of conventional values and acceptance of subcultural values, a juvenile may take on the role of the “college boy.” Here, the juvenile accepts the values of the middle class and attempts to obtain status based upon those values. Such attainment, however, is virtually impossible as the juvenile is ill equipped socially, and otherwise, to succeed. Lastly, a “delinquent boy” totally rejects conventional values and

adopts diametrically opposed values. Such a juvenile is likely to engage in serious violent crime (Siegel, 2014).

St. Louis gang crime can be explained well using Cohen's research on delinquent boys. First of all, youth living in economically depressed and socially disorganized areas often do not fare well in school. Such poor school performance is not surprising given the middle class measuring rod standards, which they are still held to. When youth in poor St. Louis neighborhoods do not do well academically, most if not all alternative options and avenues for success are closed off to them. As a result, they adopt values that they can achieve, such as valuing toughness and violence. While some youths will attempt to achieve status using conventional methods and others will simply retreat, some will take the route of the "delinquent boy." Given the history and perpetuation of poverty in these regions, gangs already exist and are ready to adopt these youth into their fold for the next generation of gang members. Those that take the route of the delinquent boy will most likely commit violent acts, and are likely to join existing establishments for like minded others who reside in the same social space, organized gangs in their own back yards.

Walter Miller

Slightly divergent from Cohen's theory that delinquency is a product of rebellion against middle-class values that disadvantaged youth are unable to obtain, Walter Miller theorized that the deviant subcultural values are simply a natural product of the lower class echelon of society (Reid, 2009).

Miller contended that the lower class is inherently different from the middle class because of certain "focal concerns." According to Miller, the lower class is characterized by focal concerns that include trouble, toughness, smartness, excitement, fate and autonomy (Alissi, 1970). These focal concerns were not an active revolt against conventional society, but rather a way to survive in lower class areas (Siegel, 2012). For example, youths in lower class areas tend to value being tough or being known as a tough person. Such a reputation has obvious benefits. First of all, it carries with it social status or power. In addition, it may discourage others from attempting to victimize the youth. In addition, violence is often seen as a way of acquiring the necessities of life in lower class areas (Siegel, 2012). Accordingly, while members of the middle class may seek conventional avenues for status and success, such as education and hard work, those of the lower class will concentrate more on brute strength and excitement (Lilly, Cullen, & Ball, 2011).

According to Miller, deviant subcultures are simply a characteristic of the underclass, and not necessarily a revolt against conventional values. Gang violence in St. Louis can be explained as a way for the gang members, who are virtually all members of the lower class, to survive in their community. Life in such a community demands that they be tough and not afraid to resort to violence to handle their own problems, or for survival. Because gangs have substantial power that they exert through collective violence, joining such an organization provides an extra level of protection, and means for existing dominance, for those individuals who adopt lower class focal concerns. These values, that violence is an accepted way to handle problems, are simply passed down to members living in the deteriorated areas in St. Louis, so it is no surprise that gang involvement is perpetuated as well.

Cloward & Ohlin

Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin were likewise pioneers in the development of subcultural theories to explain crime. They contend that crime is really a product of both psychological and sociological factors. These factors limit a person's access to both

legitimate and illegitimate means for success. Their theory of differential opportunity melds aspects of Merton's strain theory and Sutherland's differential association theory, developed to explain criminal behavior in general, in a manner that accounts for gang violence specifically (Reid, 2009).

Cloward and Ohlin posit that a person's ability to succeed through legitimate means is, of course, tempered by the person's having access to those means. For example, according to Merton's strain theory, a lack of access to education may ultimately lead to delinquent activities. Likewise, under Sutherland's differential association theory, potential criminals can only learn the business of crime from those criminals that are accessible to teach them. According to Cloward and Ohlin's differential opportunity theory, crime is a result of illegitimate opportunities rather than legitimate ones, as well as the criminal learning opportunities available to a potential offender (Reid, 2009).

Cloward and Ohlin contend that under their differential opportunity theory, three delinquent subcultures pervade lower class areas. The criminal subculture exists in economically depressed areas where young criminals learn the art of crime from older more successful criminals (Reid, 2009). The conflict subculture is one in which violence is promoted as a way of promoting one's self identity or status. The conflict subculture usually exists in an area in which younger offenders do not have access to older more successful offenders that are willing to teach them how to successfully commit crimes. Lastly, the retreatist subculture is usually left for those that are unsuccessful in both legitimate and illegitimate activities. The retreatist subculture relies heavily on substance abuse (Alissi, 1970).

Cloward and Ohlin's theory explains gang violence in St. Louis as a product of the limited legitimate opportunities available to gang members, as well as limited illegitimate opportunities to learn sophisticated crime in their communities. Gang members in the St. Louis area, living in deteriorated neighborhoods, have severely limited educational opportunities as well as other conventional means for success. Likewise, the opportunities to learn crime in these areas is limited to typical gang activities, such as violent street crimes. Obviously, gang members in such conditions will not have access to learn higher level, sophisticated crimes. They will be left with opportunities to learn street crimes. Much like Cohen and Miller's theories, this social context is a breeding ground for criminal behavior at both the individual and group levels. At the group level this is likely to take on the form of gang membership.

Part III

Elijah Anderson's Code of the Street

One of the most widely accepted views for explaining gang violence today, is Elijah Anderson's code of the street (Siegel, 2014). Anderson's code of the street examines why members of the middle class generally tend to avoid violence, while gang members and those of the underclass tend to embrace it. Anderson contended that members of the middle class were able to walk away from violent situations without losing their sense of self or self-esteem, as they have other opportunities to demonstrate their self-worth, such as in education or work-related areas. Gang members and those of the underclass, do not have such options. With success in school, work, or other legitimate areas not being an option, members of the underclass have fewer avenues to demonstrate their self-worth and are therefore more likely to feel insecure about themselves. As such, according to Anderson, they seek respect and status in the one area they know best; the street (Brezina, et al., 2004).

On the street, these disadvantaged individuals feel the need to demonstrate or prove their toughness and develop a reputation as such, or they run the risk of being seen as weak

and become prey for other aggressive individuals. It is these informal rules that Anderson calls the “code of the street” (Anderson, 1994). According to Anderson, the code rests upon three basic assumptions. First, the code requires a violent response if one is attacked or insulted publicly, lest one be seen as weak. Second, the code requires individuals to understand that a public attack will result in a violent response. Lastly, the third proposition posits that since everyone knows the code, one need not feel any remorse in meting out physical punishment for a public insult, as the person on the receiving end of the attack knew such a response was required (Brezina, et al., 2004).

According to Anderson, the code is learned not only by those that have been taught to use violence, whom Anderson calls “street” families, but by those that are raised in families and taught to adhere to conventional values, whom Anderson calls “decent” families. While the members of the “street” families learn and abide by the code in order to survive, those in “decent” families must also learn the tenants of the code in order to survive (Anderson, 1994).

As members of both families live in the same areas and may come into contact with each other, such a finding makes sense. While members raised in the “decent” families do not necessarily need to use violence to establish their status in the community, they must be aware and sensitive to their actions because even an unintentional act that is perceived as disrespectful to a member that follows the code, will result in violence. Therefore, decent families teach their children the code, not so that they will see violence as an accepted way to resolve disputes, but so that they can safely navigate their way through the community (Anderson, 1994).

Support for the Code of the Street

Studies of Anderson’s code of the street tend to support this theory for explaining gang violence. One study examined the first three waves of data from the National Youth Survey. From an examination of the data, a positive relationship was found among people that adopt values consistent with Anderson’s “code of the street” and the likelihood of being involved in a violent incident (Brezina, et al., 2004).

Likewise, the data suggested that social learning plays a role in the adoption of values consistent with the “code of the street.” For instance, being raised by non-existent parents, or having friends that are violent themselves, plays a role in the adoption of the use of violence later in life. In addition, a lack of opportunities for legitimate success also plays a role in the adoption of such beliefs (Brezina et al., 2004).

Other studies support the code of the street. Stewart and Simons studied data from the Family and Community Health Study, collected in 1997 and 1999. They hypothesized that an individual who is raised in a “street” family will be more likely to follow the street code compared to an individual raised in a “decent” family. They also hypothesized that both neighborhood violence and economic depression would lead to a greater adoption rate of the street code when compared to affluent neighborhoods not marked with violence (Stewart & Simons, 2006).

Consistent with previous studies, Stewart and Simons found that youth raised in a street family were more likely to adopt the code of the street as opposed to those not raised in a street family. Likewise, they found that depressed neighborhood conditions and episodes of violence went hand in hand with the adoption of Anderson’s code of the street (Stewart & Simons, 2006).

The applicability of Anderson’s code of the street does not appear to be limited to the United States. A study of street violence in the United Kingdom tends to support Anderson’s theory. Responses to interviews of 118 violent incarcerated offenders suggests

that Anderson's code of the street can explain violent crime in the United Kingdom (Brookman, Bennett, Hochstetler, & Copes, 2010). The goal of the study was to interview violent offenders and compare their responses to the key components of Anderson's code of the street theory to see if their explanations support that theory. According to Brookman, et al., the tenets of Anderson's code of the street most directly linked to violence are: that any attacks, however slight, would be met with force; that acts of violence would reduce the possibility of becoming a victim in the future; and lastly, that in order to gain status and respect, one must have a reputation as a violent individual (Brookman, et al., 2010).

Based upon the interviews, the evidence suggested that many acts of violence were, in fact, meted out as punishment for an act of disrespect or some perceived slight. Likewise, based upon the interviews, physical violence was not the only way to punish someone for a perceived slight or act of disrespect. Some offenders punished their transgressors by robbing them and taking something of value from them. Further, many of those interviewed contended that a violent response is often required so that they would not be seen weak and become the target of future attacks or victimization. The offenders perceived their reputation as being important in preventing future attacks. Accordingly, the interviews tended to support Anderson's code of the street (Brookman, et al., 2010).

In addition to previous research supporting Anderson's code of the street to explain violent crime, research specific to violence in St. Louis, Missouri, supports Anderson's theory as well. Kubrin and Weitzer studied retaliatory homicides in economically depressed areas in St. Louis. A retaliatory homicide, for purposes of the study, was one in which the homicide stemmed from an act of, or perceived act of disrespect between two parties. Such incidents typically involved an escalation of violence between two parties until one party responded by killing the other because of the attack or perceived attack (Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003).

In their study, Kubrin and Weitzer hypothesized that if a code of the street existed in disadvantaged neighborhoods, those neighborhoods would have a higher rate of retaliatory killings, and that the killings would be motivated or caused by adherence to the code. As hypothesized, their study revealed that the economically depressed neighborhoods did in fact experience a higher rate of retaliatory killings when compared to affluent neighborhoods, and that such killings resulted from adherence to the code. (Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003).

When exploring the cause or motivation for the killings, common themes of the code were revealed. For instance, the study revealed that many of the killings were brought about as a punishment or retaliation for an act of disrespect. Likewise, an act of disrespect need not be directed at the offender, but could be directed at someone close to the offender. For example, some killings were motivated because the victim insulted the offender's girlfriend or a female member of the offender's family (Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003).

Just as Anderson spoke of a feeling of isolation or abandonment in neighborhoods that had adopted the code, Kubrin and Weitzer found such evidence in their study. In areas that have adopted the code of the street, residents feel that law enforcement is ineffective in solving their problems. This feeling often leads to the residents taking matters into their own hands. Such was the case in St. Louis. In the economically depressed areas, many of the residents refused to assist or cooperate with law enforcement. To begin with, residents refused to cooperate with law enforcement because they believed that the decedent victim deserved to die, and therefore the residents saw no need for any further action by law enforcement. In addition, many residents in such areas refused to cooperate with law enforcement because they had little faith that law enforcement could protect them if they decided to cooperate (Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003).

Lastly, Kubrin and Weitzer found that both residents and family members of offenders expected violent reprisals for acts of disrespect. It was not uncommon to find evidence that family members supported and encouraged an offender to kill someone who had challenged or disrespected them. In addition, the study revealed instances where the offenders would proudly proclaim their actions in an effort to seek approval and win praise from family members (Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003).

Given the widespread support for Anderson's code of the street and its specific applicability to violence in St. Louis, the presence of gangs is not a surprising phenomenon to facilitate support and protection for vulnerable individuals who readily turn to violence to manage life problems. For every act or even perceived act of disrespect, the code demands a violent reaction. The code demands that each attack warrants another attack, thereby creating a cycle of violence that repeats itself, and often in the context of collective violence through gang behavior.

Conclusion

As demonstrated throughout this paper, cultural deviance theory is well equipped to explain why gangs exist in economically depressed neighborhoods, why individuals support values and behaviors reflected by organized gangs, as well as why they often choose to join such organizations. Given the dire situations of St. Louis residents who live in impoverished areas lacking social capital, it is no surprise that violence and in particular gang violence, thrives despite overall reductions in violent crime nationwide. Criminologists have postulated alternatives to cultural deviance theories as explanations for gangs and gang violence, but none have received such empirical attention or support at the time of this writing. Of course, to gain a complete understanding of the phenomenon it is necessary to consider a host of causal factors and hypotheses, but the fact remains that cultural deviance theories are a key area for further investigation given their historical and contemporary salience.

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