

TITLE: Gang Identity as Performance  
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AUTHOR: Robert Garot  
POSITION: Assistant Professor of Sociology  
AFFILIATION: John Jay College of Criminal Justice

*Abstract:*

While conceptualizing identity as performance is commonplace in the social sciences, it is remarkably lacking in studies of gangs. This entry reviews some allusions to gangs and identity in the literature, highlighting the importance of a central interactional mechanism for performing gangs: demanding of another, “Where you from!” Such a challenge creates a lively venue for performing identity and emotional manipulation, for both for the instigator who offers the challenge as well as the respondent. Rather than conceptualizing young people as “gang members” and “gangs” as a static group, we may see how the doing of gangs is strategic and context-sensitive. Such an approach provides an alternative to conceptualizing identity, and especially gang identity, as a fixed personal characteristic, but as a sensual response to a moment’s vicissitudes.

*Keywords:*

gangs, identity, performance, inner-city, boundaries

Over the past fifty years, social scientists have increasingly turned from essentializing identity as a fixed characteristic, to understanding identity as performance. Building from Goffman's (1959, 1976) seminal work on impression management, and Garfinkel's (1984) and Sacks' (1995) insights into identity as an accomplishment, identity is increasingly recognized not as an obdurate quality, but as a resource whose relevance is strategically, contextually determined. Through dress, (Davis, 1992; Entwistle 2001; Garot and Katz, 2003) mannerisms (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Young 1980; Sudnow 1978), and language (Gumperz 1982; Schegloff 1992; Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1995), individuals make and dispute claims to identity based in socially recognized categories, and such claims and contestations become the bases for sustaining interaction. Scholars have examined the performance of class (Willis, 1977; MacLeod, 1995; Granfield, 1992), race and ethnicity (Moerman, 1974; Cohen, 1978; Wieder and Pratt, 1989) gender (Young, 1980; West and Zimmerman, 1987; Butler, 1990; Thorne, 1993; Mendoza-Denton, 1996), and sexual identity (Queen, 1997; Yoshino, 2006), yet aside from a few exceptions (Conquergood, 1994a, 1994b, 1997; Mendoza-Denton, 1996; Garot, 2007), such insights have rarely been applied to the study of gang members.

According to Cohen (1990:12), "That membership in gangs confers identity (...) could be the single most common proposition encountered in the literature on gangs." Yet this proposition is rather static, concerned with such questions as whether a gang is a primary or secondary group, why young people become gang members, what they do in a gang, or how they leave a gang. Some researchers, such as Monti (1994) and Decker and Winkle (1996) determine gang membership for analytic purposes by asking respondents if they claim, without recognizing how such "claims" are highly variable and dependent

on how the respondent reads the local context. Such variability is surely known by gang scholars, although it has been avoided as a topic, since “gangs” are analyzed as a phenomenon in themselves, similar to a club or an institution, rather than as a constitutive feature of a local ecology (see Katz and Jackson-Jacobs, 2004). A “gang” does not exist as an autonomous entity, a force such as gravity, bidding members to do its dirty work. Rather, gang members have agency, and through that agency, they may invoke whether or not a membership category such as “gang member” is relevant in a given circumstance.

Descriptions of invocations of gang membership are a common topic in the gang literature (see Brotherton, 1994). As Jack Katz (1988, 141) states, “virtually all ethnographies of street violence among adolescent elites describe fights generated by *interrogations* or spontaneous *declarations* of group membership on public streets.” Such declarations include public pronouncements such as: “We’re the Vice Lords, the mighty Vice Lords!” (*ibid.*, 142), “parading” “in apparent unison while displaying... insignia of membership” (*ibid.*, 142), as well as various means of undermining school authority. Matza (1964) used the metaphor of “drift” to capture the nuances of delinquent activity. Yet the metaphor is not quite apt in regards to gangs, for at times a young person definitely is a gang member, and at other times the same young person definitely is not, without any necessary gradual escalation or deescalation in gang-related behavior. Drawing on the metaphor of performance, we may explore how gang membership is invoked as a members’ reification practice, which may just as well dereify gangs.

Young people in ecologies where gangs are active may modulate ways of talking, walking, dressing, writing graffiti, wearing make-up, and hiding or revealing tattoos in playing with markers of embodied identity, to obscure, reveal, or provide contradictory signals on a continuum from gang-related to nongang-related (Conquergood, 1994a, 1994b, 1997; Mendoza-Denton, 1996; Garot and Katz, 2003). One of the primary ways to perform gang identity is through the demand, “where you from” (Garot, 2007). Intended to resolve any ambiguity, it actually becomes merely another resource to be worked in the contingent, variable effort in which young people everywhere engage in molding the self. This emotional challenge to identity is a language game (Wittgenstein 1953), in an interaction ritual designed to create action and challenge face (Goffman 1967). Moreover, to question a young person’s gang affiliation is not primarily of relevance to gang researchers, but to young people. “Who you claimin’?” “Where you from?” or “What you be about” (Conquergood, 1994a:27) are locally recognized interrogation devices, and central practices for demonstrating a gang identity and forcing the respondent to make an identity claim in terms of gangs. Thus, ecologies of gangs provide fertile ground for grappling with how identity is done. A focus on the accomplishment of such practices, rather than merely their “causes” or “effects,” will contribute to an appreciation (Matza, 1969) of the skills (Lyng, 1990) of gangbanging, as opposed to the ongoing criminalization of gang members’ artful ways.

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