

# Chicana Gang Members: Resistance to Traditional Women's Roles

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## ABSTRACT

*This is an ethnographic project designed to explore the lives, needs, and struggles of three Chicana gang members in the Lower Yakima Valley in Washington. The intersections of race, class, and gender are discussed and viewed through the narratives of these young women. The objective was to explore whether the gang is an outlet for resistance to social structures and traditional women's roles. Though each of these Chicanas were in different stages in their development, it is nevertheless clear that each experienced the gang as a "safe agency" in which they were free to resist traditional roles and incorporate nontraditional roles while continuing to struggle for acceptance in terms of mainstream values.*

## INTRODUCTION

"GANG," is a controversial label created to define a group of people. However, the meaning varies from person to person. It is sometimes used to refer to an organization, criminals who join together, or a *familia*. It sometimes includes reference to common values and interests, to a social environment, to a territory, and/or to criminal involvement. It may be identified with a specific race, class, or gender. Although extensive research exists describing gangs, gang members, and gang activity, there remains a general lack of knowledge about the relationship between group dynamics and criminal behavior. This makes a general definition of delinquent gangs difficult.

Several criminologists have provided definitions of gangs. For example, as noted by Bursik and Grasmick (1995), Frederic Thrasher was the first to spark interest in the study of gangs. In 1927, he defined a gang as "an interstitial group originally formed spontaneously and then integrated through conflict. The result of this collective behavior is the development of tradition, unreflective internal structure, esprit de corps, solidarity, morale, group awareness, and attachment to a local territory." Later, according to Bursik and Grasmick (1995), Klein (1992) described a gang as: "an identifiable group of youngsters who are generally perceived as a distinct aggregation by others in their neighborhood, recognize themselves as a group (almost invariably with a group name), and have been involved in a sufficient number of delinquent incidents to call forth a consistent negative response from neighborhood residents and/or law enforcement agencies." Despite all the research, there remains little consensus on what a gang is, who is a gang member, what constitutes gang activity, and how gangs arise. Further, along with these ambiguities, there is another critical, but often ignored, aspect of gangs. That is, what is the involvement and importance of women in gangs.

Until recently, investigation of the role of girls in gangs has been neglected. While there has been a growing number of studies investigating the connections between male gangs, violence, and other criminal activities, relatively little research has focused specifically on female involvement in related activities. As with all young women who find their way into the juvenile justice system, girls in gangs have been “present but invisible” (Chesney-Lind, 1998). In early writings, girls were defined solely in terms of their interpersonal and structural relations to male gang members. Their roles were described by male gang members to male researchers and interpreted by male academics. For example, Thrasher (1927) found that gangs in Chicago were overwhelming male. He described the girls who were involved as “immoral.” He describes their chief activities as petting, necking, illicit sex, and mugging. More recently, Campbell (1995) has noted that there are some predominantly female gangs, and that they have names like the Tulips, the Lone Star Club, the Under the L gang and the Night Riders.

Historically, girl gang members have been either overlooked or stereotyped as “tomboys” or “sex objects” (Campbell, 1995). The relative absence of research on the role of girl gang life has perpetuated the stereotype that they are primarily auxiliary members and relegated to gender-specific crimes such as seducing males, concealing weapons, and instigating fights between rival male gangs. In a study by Bernard (1949), female gang members in New York took on their own names even though all were affiliated with male gangs. Characteristically, their function was to carry weapons because they were assumed to be immune to search by male officers. In addition, they provided alibis, acted as spies and lures, and provided sex for male members. The overwhelming impression was that gang girls are sexual property.

The 1950’s were the era of the street worker, that is, social workers who attempted to reach teenage gangs and reform their behavior. They described gang members as passive, exploited people of low self-esteem and ability. Girls were seen as sexual objects to be cajoled, tricked, or forced into sexual relations. There was no mention made of the rapes, gangbangs, or homosexual prostitution by boys, let alone their involvement in normal, if precocious, sex. The street workers’ aim seems to have been not to encourage the independence of girls from boys, but to inculcate “feminine” middle-class values about their sexuality by conducting classes in cosmetics and etiquette, organizing sewing parties, and gathering charity boxes to send to foreign countries (Campbell, 1995).

## The Study

Being raised in the Yakima Lower Valley in Washington, I grew up with a negative image of young gang members. The only image I saw in the media was a portrayal of deviant Chicanos who had committed murder, robbery, or drive-by-shootings and left his gang sign spray-painted on the wall of some building. I began to wonder why the phenomenon of gangs seemed to be increasing dramatically within the area. At the time, I simply made my own assumptions or explanations as to why youth, and in particular women, became involved in gangs. My ideas seem consistent with those Dietrich (1998) who describes the gang as a group that provides youth with the freedom to search for themselves and argues that “these choices appear to offer liberation, a means of achieving dignity and values and a direct route to freedom and ‘respect.’” I attempt to ask, in a more systematic way, the questions I have always had in hope of gaining a better understanding of the needs of young women who are gang members.

Here I explore the role of girls in gangs by looking at the world through their eyes. As a woman, and as a Chicana, I believe that an examination of the lives, needs, and struggles of Chicana gang members in the Yakima Lower Valley is much needed. This research focuses on these women’s lives and listens to their experiences from a perspective other than that of the media, male researchers, or male gang members.

I chose to focus on the experiences of Chicana adolescents because the lives of these women are filled with challenges and boundaries set by socioeconomic status, social pressures such as being successful “law-abiding citizens,” and pressures from peers and family. It is a process of self-discovery in which an individual is dealing with the transition from youth to adulthood. These young women not only have to face these new experiences and changes, they must also cope with structural conditions that make the process more difficult. As explained by Dietrich (1998): “Chicana adolescents experience a variety of social, economic, and cultural pressures that orient them towards making decisions to join gangs.” These Chicanas are neither adults nor children; they occupy the curiosity of increasing responsibilities, but are still controlled by certain rules and restrictions. Further, as Chesney-Lind (1998) notes, when female researchers have studied female gang members, a different perspective emerges. This perspective suggests that girl gang members do not fully accept conceptions of their roles and positions as they are often, and stereotypically, described.

I am especially interested in Chicanas because of their seemingly high involvement in gangs. The importance of integrating feminist delinquency theory is to be critically aware of explanations of female behavior that are sensitive to its context in a male-dominated or patriarchal society. As Chesney-Lind argues, it is clear that the shape of female behavior and misbehavior is affected by gender stratification. It is, in effect, the response of a male-dominated system to female deviance. A feminist analysis of delinquency allows us to examine ways in which agencies of social control, including the police, the courts, and prisons, act to reinforce a woman’s place in male society.

This study represents preliminary ethnographic fieldwork. I felt that the only way to really grasp and successfully comprehend the experiences of Chicanas involved in gangs was to go into their communities and directly interact with them. It was also important for me to conduct my fieldwork in my hometown, the area in which I lived my experience as an adolescent Chicana. Further, it is crucial for me to increase the awareness of my community about these youth. It is also necessary to provide a framework to better understand the needs of these women so that programs or services to successfully reach out to them can be created. In addition, this research entailed questions relating to the struggles of race, and class, and their impacts on gang involvement among Chicanas.

To find answers we must conduct research on female gang membership on its own terms rather than as a comparative footnote to studies of the male gang. It is crucial that we incorporate the community and the class, gender, and race contexts to address the impacts that each has had on these girls’ lives. It is my hope to identify what it means to be a woman growing up as a Mexicana/Chicana and how coping and adapting to the environment in the Yakima Lower Valley may lead to involvement in a gang. Gangs can be seen as representing a means by which some youth seek to resolve problems presented by their structural and cultural positions in relation to both their families, and processes of racism and sexism in the larger society. The words and actions of gang members seek to resolve the intractable problems of class by simultaneously opposing and rejecting some aspects of community and mainstream values while incorporating and internalizing others (Cohen, 1972; Hall and Jefferson, 1976).

It is also necessary to investigate whether involvement in a gang is an empowering and liberating process in the development of individual identities. It is possible that these women have taken an unconscious “feminist” approach to survival and regained their voice and space as women and as an oppressed Chicanas. When girls and women affiliated with gangs are described, it is often through media stereotypes of “bad” or “evil,” or even overly “masculine” girls. I will examine whether these girls seek liberation from the stigma attached to their gender, race and class by their involvement in the gang in ways distinct from males.

While individuals do make life choices, these choices are often constrained or shaped by their social, political, economic, and cultural environments. Chicana adolescents often succumb

to efforts to control them that are exerted by their families, school officials, and boyfriends. Still, many find creative means to assert control over their daily lives, their bodies, and their futures. Unfortunately, their efforts toward emancipation sometimes result in pregnancy, criminal records, or drug addiction. These difficulties can then trap them into reproducing what had been labeled in discussions of public policy as the “cycle of poverty” (Dietrich, 1998).

## **HYPOTHESES**

Given the above, this research is directed by the following question: Is the gang viewed by Chicana gang members as one of few opportunities for resistance to social structures and traditional women’s roles? I address the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: The gang is one of few options young Chicanas see available to them to validate who they are. Here I explore the idea of the gang as a provider of emotional needs such as a sense of belonging, and as an avenue for self-empowerment.

Hypothesis 2: Participation is perceived to be a survival or coping mechanism in dealing with poverty, and the oppressive conditions many of these women face in their daily lives. We must question their position as young working-class Chicanas and how they are treated by the educational system, the juvenile justice system, and their family, and the effects of their socioeconomic status on their lives. These are institutional, social and cultural boundaries that sometimes constrain both behavior and thoughts.

Hypothesis 3: Gang member activity provides an outlet for young Chicanas to exercise independent and non-traditional female roles. This is based on feminist theory to examine the relationship between the roles Chicanas play and the pressures to engage in traditional roles. These pressures come from traditional family roles and expectations, and demands from their male counterparts.

## **METHODS**

### Participants

I interviewed three Chicana gang members living in the Yakima Lower Valley. Two are former gang members and one is presently a gang member. Their names have been changed to secure their identity. I refer to them as Natalia 18, Crystal 22, and Susana 19. Two of the girls are third generation U.S. citizens and one is second generation. In addition, I interviewed a detective who directs a gang taskforce in Yakima.

### Questionnaire

I formulated questions designed to address my hypotheses. The questionnaire was not viewed by the participant and was used only as a guide. Each interview was recorded while I took notes. Later, transcripts of the interviews were produced.

### Procedure

The study was conducted from June 6 though July 28, 2000. The fieldwork was conducted in two weeks. I called all alternative school in the Yakima Lower Valley and explained my research interest in Chicana gang members. I asked if they could assist me by allowing me to speak to some of the girls known to be gang members, or refer me to another

contact. I also visited the Juvenile Justice Center in Yakima and spoke to the assistant director about my research. He referred me to two probation officers who introduced me to two girls involved in gangs. I was introduced to a third participant by a social worker at a youth outreach program designed by the Farm-workers Clinic. I visited the first participant at her home and then moved to a park to conduct the interview. I met the second participant at her work and conducted the interview in an available office in her department. I visited the third participant at the house of the first participant and then conducted the interview at the same park where I conducted the first interview. Each participant read and signed a confirmation letter, which explained the research and the interview procedures.

Each interview was unique. Each participant's individuality led the discussion and sometimes addressed questions not included in my questionnaire. Therefore, the amount of time for the interviews ranged from one and a half hours to three. When I first met each subject, we talked casually about ourselves. This helped to create a sense of trust and an assurance of confidentiality. This also helped decrease the uneasiness of discussing issues regarding their experience with the gang, social institutions, and family. I dressed very casually when meeting with each of them and spoke about myself and my experiences in the Yakima Lower Valley. They asked about my college experience and discussed their ambition to continue their education.

Two participants seemed genuinely interested in sharing their experiences with being affiliated with a gang. The first participant seemed uneasy at first, but eventually began to disclose her thoughts. The second participant was enthusiastic and completely ready to share 'her story' with me. She told me she would be completely honest about her experiences because she wants others to know about life in the gang. The third participant seemed very distant and hesitant. I asked her if she was sure she wanted to continue the interview. She accepted, but her answers were short and concise. She later told me that her lack of attention was due to a drug substance in her system. Nevertheless she described herself as usually quiet, but very direct.

## **RESULTS**

Gangs have always been viewed as a social problem and as an example of deterioration in society. School officials have often banned and censored anything that can be seen as gang-related. Youth have been criticized and ostracized from communities. I agree that we must continue to develop outreach programs that are able to connect and meet these gang member's needs. However, to do that we must question what they are lacking in their community, homes, and schools. This exploration brings forth a voice that has been historically minimized, misinterpreted, or ignored by scholars, friends, family, and society. Before we attempt to find solutions to these women's dilemmas, needs, and/or problems we must first listen to their "stories and their lives."

I wanted to determine whether both the immediate environment and traditional women's roles influenced the subjects' behavior and way of thinking. The investigation focused on whether the gang is a process in which these girls rejected the constructed social boundaries. Through their narratives we are able to see such rejection. For example, most of them rejected school, an institution in which they perceived that they were neither respected nor supported in any way. From an outsider's point of view, school rejection can be seen as "social deviance and poor judgment." However, for some, the choice of joining a gang is their only opportunity for resistance. These choices are not any different from those of a white middle-class girl who makes the decision about which group or organization within school best fits her needs and lifestyle. These decisions or choices are not about "being deviant," but limitations in opportunity. They are normal adolescent girls looking for acceptance and a comfort zone. They are simply attempting to survive given the limitations in their lives.

While these young Chicanas do make life choices, these choices are often constrained or shaped by their economic and cultural environments as well. These girls are subjected to a variety of cultural norms that constrain their behavior. Anglo norms, Chicano norms, the norms associated with being a woman, and norms associated with being an adolescent are also circumscribed by class structure within the United States. Therefore, these young women find themselves in a struggle in which they must find alternative ways to fulfill their immediate needs.

The findings from the interviews were not all consistent since the three women were at different stages of development and affiliation with the gang. Hypotheses 1 posited that the gang is the way of seeking validation of self. By validation I mean whether the gang provided a sense of belonging and pride of who they are as young Chicanas. All three interviews revealed that the gang offered them a comfort zone because members accepted them for who they are. They were not looking for that 'ideal' image of what a young Chicana should be. The gang provided an outlet for these women to release some of the stresses they carry with them on a daily basis. This includes not feeling accepted by other classmates and feeling powerless against others who have more than they do.

*Crystal:* The gang made me feel pride, this is who I am. It gave you respect, probably not the respect that you wanted. I intimidated people to leave me alone or to get something that I wanted.

Hypothesis 2 focused on their environment and their socioeconomic status and how this may influence their behavior and membership in a gang. This hypothesis was also supported because they spoke of how the gang was their protector from injustices in school and the juvenile justice system. During this period of adolescence they were coming to the realization that they did not own certain things or carry certain privileges. The gang helped them cope with this disparity. They were able to relate to the others in the gang. They shared special bonds together that only they were able to understand and communicate to one another. The gang also offered them solutions, whether positive or negative, to defend and empower themselves. These girls were not getting the attention they needed. They searched and found acceptance in the gang.

*Natalia:* I think here in school it's all about sports. If you aren't into sports like in the varsity team or a cheerleader then you are nothing.

Hypothesis 3 focused on traditional and non-traditional women's roles. Traditional women's roles include being "good mothers," "good girls," and nurturers who are passive, submissive, one who attends church regularly, and a good student. Non-traditional women's roles include struggling to resist these traditional roles and recognizing the importance of trying to search for one's individuality, one's own space and, most importantly, reclaiming or strengthening one's voice. Also included is rejecting male domination, and physical, sexual and mental abuse and violence. Obtaining a career, being single mothers and supporting and raising their child on their own while working full-time and getting an education, becoming a scholar, scientist, *chola*, and involvement in the military are all forms of taking non-traditional women's roles.

Based on one's interpretation of the dynamics involved in the gang, support for this hypothesis is questionable. The narratives of Natalia, Crystal, and Susana show that they agree, to an extent, that they lead non-traditional roles. This is not to say that the gang is the way out or the way to success because clearly it is not. However, it does provide the opportunity to learn and empower oneself as an individual. After the "romantic ideal" stage is over, when they are no longer seen as strong assets to the organization, acts of violence, crime and abuse decrease as they

take a step back and re-analyze their position. Upon reflecting on their lives, each agreed that the lessons learned and the confidence obtained were taken to a different level and stage of their lives. They gained power and unity within their lives, which was attributed to the gang. We can argue this hypothesis was supported or not supported depending on the framework used.

Different frameworks are utilized to defend each argument. One views these Chicana gang members through the lens of the gang and their community. The other is through the lens of the dominant society, which argues that they are still mothers vulnerable to male domination and seeking male validation. From the first framework these women are now searching for the best for their lives and their children with or without the help of their male counterparts. They have learned to survive and defend themselves from discrimination. Crystal and Susana, for example, are both single mothers striving to meet their idea of “success” by working and educating themselves while still raising their children.

Although these Chicanas are in different stages of their development, it is nevertheless clear that each experienced the gang as a safe agency to resist traditional roles and incorporate non-traditional roles. However, it is also clear that they continue to struggle to gain acceptance via mainstream values.

*Crystal:* Their dad is a loser, I've gone through a lot with this man. He was beating the hell out of me. Now, I want to get a better job, buy my own house, have my kids graduate and settle down-have the all-American dream!

## **LIMITATIONS**

The first limitation was the short amount of time to complete the research and the time of year. At the time I was conducting my fieldwork, most students were on summer vacation and the alternative schools were not in session. This made it very difficult to connect with female gang members. Another limitation was the issue of confidentiality. Probation officers and the detective had information on some of these girls, but they were not allowed to share any names. I spoke to a counselor who had many female gang member contacts. He was able to refer me to them, but they were under the age of 18, and this age group was not approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee.

Due to the sensitivity of the issues discussed some of the participants did not feel ready or willing to discuss their full experiences. Other participants may have been involved in criminal activity or been aware of certain acts of violence, but did not want to disclose this information. I believe one potential participant withdrew for this reason, even though I had described the procedure and assured her that no questions would be related to sex, drugs or crime. Again, I was viewed as an outsider and, they were extremely cautious. A third limitation was the distance from Pullman to the Yakima Lower Valley, which made contacting participants and officials difficult.