Group Processes and Street Identity: Adolescent Chicano Gang Members

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Adolescence is often characterized as a period of life in which a person’s identity undergoes marked changes to adjust to new body appearances and societal expectations. Early life experiences, socio-cultural environmental conditions, and agents of socialization must be accounted for in assessing this new identity formation. For a small, but considerable portion of barrio (neighborhood) youth with problematic backgrounds, the street gang has arisen as a competitor of other institutions, such as family and schools, to guide and direct self-identification. For those who do become members, the gang norms, its functions, and its roles help shape what a person thinks about himself and others, and the gang provides models for how to look and act under various circumstances. Such youths usually become involved with the gang during their adolescent “psychosocial moratorium” (Erikson 1956), a stage between childhood and adulthood when peers especially help guide self-identification. For some gang members the psychosocial need for peer affirmation, convention, and support becomes more or less long lasting. Through immersion in gang routines and affairs, they accomplish the personal task of age and sex role clarification, contribute to the role defini-

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tions of others in the group, and support such salient gang practices as defending their territory. Thus personal needs merge with group needs.

The urban Chicano gang is a phenomenon that began decades ago as a loosely structured “boy” gang characterized more by mischief than malice (Bogardus 1926), but has evolved since then into an established gang subculture with a clear set of values, goals, roles, initiations, and other group symbols and functions. Most members refer to themselves as *cholos* (the Chicano street style, and a term also used in some parts of Latin America to describe those who are intermediate, culturally, between the metropolitan and indigenous Indian cultures). Much of the gang subculture reflects a mixture of patterns, combining the usual youth peer cohort friendship and emotional support activities, such as in the Mexican *palomilla* (cohorting) traditions, with the more renowned gang violence and antisocial features also found in most American urban gangs. The latter activities have commanded exaggerated public attention, to the point where gang slayings and “rumbles” are more important to the media than what lies behind such behavior. This distorted viewpoint often leads to the public impression that all or most low-income barrio youth are gang members.

Only a small percentage of barrio youths join, perhaps only 3 to 10 percent (Morales 1982:141), and even most of these eventually mature out of the gang (Matza 1964; Moore 1978). Yet the gang profoundly influences the entire community. The gang has perpetuated itself and engulfed marginally problematic youth, who temporarily or sporadically seek the gang as a source of identity. Klein (1971) and Cartwright, Tomson, and Schwartz (1975) have noted a hard-core and fringe dichotomy of gang membership, reflecting the different degrees of participation in gang activities, and Vigil (1988) has suggested the further distinction of regular, peripheral, temporary, and situational gang members, again to reflect the differing intensity and duration of their gang attachments. Indeed, degree of gang involvement can usually be gauged by how severe and deep-rooted the effects of racial and cultural discrimination and poverty have been on an individual, or how family and school authorities have failed to influence and guide.

While certain structural and cultural situations and conditions might have initially generated the gang, it is also clear that psycho-
logical features accompanied these developments, an interdepen-
dent process that Spiro has noted in other contexts (1978:354).
A social psychology construct of the adolescent identification process
within a gang context is best formulated with a combination of the-
etical perspectives. Ego development begins with early childhood
and involves family and environmental experiences and how these
events are internalized in the meaning of self. Accompanying this
self-identification process, of course, are the effects of the social mil-
ieu, especially the streets, which provide group associations, behav-
iors, role models and pressures to conform. The latter group and
role influences are intensified during adolescence when a problem-
atic “psychosocial moratorium” age/sex adjustment emerges to
make peers and street models even more important.

Identity and self-identification are central to the nexus of ego,
group, and role phenomena in the gang members’ situation. Gang
member’s problematic early ego formation is clearly set in the
stresses and strains of poverty and family ruptures. Such instability
usually pervades other realms of their life, such as schooling. Be-
cause of these events, much of their youth is spent under unsuperv-
ised conditions, which are specifically oriented to street affairs.
While ego development proceeds apace with family and milieu in-
fluences, it is under the aegis of street peers and realities that early
impressions are made about group patterns and role ideals that re-
fect barrio gang life. Such an early and consistent familiarity with
gang life constitutes a type of preadolescent induction into the gang.
However, it is during the psychosocial moratorium of adolescence,
when confusions and ambiguities of one’s sex and age require clar-
ification, that the group behaviors and roles of the gang become
even more important.

An overarching factor in all these developments is the attendant
pressure to survive street realities. In coping with the fear engen-
dered by remaining unsupervised and under the purview of street
“toughs,” the ego becomes tainted. A perceived threat to one’s very
survival accompanies ego development, and it implies both main-
taining a physical wholeness and coping psychologically with the
element of fear. It is precisely these street-generated personal feel-
ings that make the street gangs’ group and role characteristics so
attractive as a requisite for survival.
Examination of the formation and affirmation of a self-identity within the gang context requires that attention be focused on how personal needs combine and intersect with characteristics of the group and the roles it affords. Each affects, and in turn is affected by, the other, especially during adolescence. The process, in operation for several generations, has brought about a gang subculture with a strong psychological orientation.

This paper will show how a youth’s self-identity, for example, is inspired and affirmed by commitment to and identification with the gang—that is, one learns what to think about one’s self and how to act—and the group itself and the roles that group members represent provide the person with the ingredients for self-identification. The process in such cases reflects Erikson’s (1968:61) more generalized description: “Psychosocial identity thus depends on a complementarity of an inner (ego or self) synthesis in the individual and of role integration in his group.” In the case of the Chicano street gang, the group becomes incorporated into the member’s ego ideal. Roles provided by the gang, and the symbols and rituals by which these roles are enacted, reinforce this identity. Specific extreme roles for some serve to epitomize focal gang values and provide for the behavioral release of the inner tensions of particularly troubled youths.

Research for the present study was conducted over a period of five years (1976–1981) in urban, suburban and rural barrios of Southern California. Data (including life histories) were collected by intensive interviews with gang members, their peers and relatives, and representatives of the criminal justice and public services systems; participant observation in varied settings; and questionnaire-guided surveys. Selected data have also been derived from the Chicano Pinto Research Project, a community and academic collaborative investigation of more than ten years on two established East Los Angeles gangs, El Hoyo Maravilla and White Fence. Personal accounts of gang members’ early lives and subsequent affiliation and identification with the street gang, in particular, have been heavily drawn on in preparation of this paper.

THE BARRIO AND SELF-IDENTITY: SOURCES OF COMMITMENT

Development of self-identity proceeds largely through interpersonal interaction, and Whiting (1980:103) has observed that “pat-
terns of interpersonal behavior are developed in the settings that one frequents and that the most important characteristics of a setting are the cast of characters who occupy the set, in particular, the age and sex of these characters.” Identity can be conceived in terms of four component aspects of the self: the ideal self (what a person would like to be); feared self (what a person would not like to be); claimed self (what a person would like others to think they are); and real self (what a person believes he is)(Wallace and Fogelson 1965). Juxtaposition of these identities within a person usually involves maximizing the distance between feared and real identities and minimizing the gap between ideal and real selves (Caughey 1980:188; Avruch 1982:111). Gang members who have had early and continuing street influences usually appear to have minimal discrepancies between real and ideal identities; as noted, this is their primary social arena because of the instability of their family and school experiences. In contrast, less experienced novitiates would be expected to be more concerned about avoiding the feared self and strive much harder to make the real self fit the ideal (a gang member).

A barrio gang’s activities revolve to a considerable degree around self-identity strivings; in effect what Erikson generally referred to for all people as a continuous life-long experience of synthesizing external objects into one’s meaning of self (Hall and Gardner 1968:278). The development of a self-identity, as Erikson (1963:26) pointed out, starts with early life experiences, “where the schoolchild begins to feel that the color of his skin, the background of his parents, or the fashion of his clothes rather than his wish and his will to learn will decide his worth as an apprentice, and thus his sense of identity.” The sense of identity typically begins through a person’s interaction with mother and father, which for gang members is often an emotionally unstable and stressful situation. Stressful parental relations created the preconditions that made the gang a source of identification. Quicker (1983:40–44) reports similar findings in his study of Chicana (female) gang members.

A comparison of the specific environments of gang members (especially the most committed ones) with those of the barrio youths who are not in the gang (and even some who are fringe gang members) shows a wide difference in their backgrounds (Buriel 1984; Buriel, Calzada, and Vasquez 1982). Gang members are usually reared in poorer homes, mother-centered family situations with
more siblings, and marginal, unstable economic conditions (unemployment and welfare) (Vigil 1983, 1988). Their socialization—that is, "the process by which children learn to do, and want to do what is required and expected by others . . . [and which results in] the desire for approval" (Edgerton 1978:446)—has been altered by the stresses that such circumstances engender, in ways that open them to influences, which for others are ineffective. Gang members reflect an early and continuing street socialization and enculturation experience, and especially because the alternatives of school, family, and sports, and so on, have failed to provide consistent direction. They also report a strong reliance on street role models, particularly veteranos (veterans) and carnales (brothers, real or fictive.).

Early difficulties are reflected in breakdowns in conventional social control, as in the case of a boy who "threw a chair at the teacher," or the youth who reported that "every Thursday night was practically hand-to-hand combat between my mother and father." Personal problems have begun much earlier in life and, in part, explain their preteen delinquent activities (such as running away from home, petty shoplifting, and street fighting). In their attempts to cope with such backgrounds and experiences, these youths have little opportunity to attain a balance among the real, ideal, feared, and claimed aspects of identity.

Ruptures in family life generally lead to regular and prolonged exposure to street activities that affect the tenor of self-identification. Lack of parental supervision, often accompanied by feelings of rejection by one's family, operate in conjunction with the readiness of older street youths to recruit and socialize youngsters to their way of life. A 17-year-old interviewee from White Fence recalled, for example:

I was 9 years old and I used to hang around with pretty old people from there [the barrio gang]. They used to call me Shorty because I would be seen late at night, fucking around and stuff in parking lots and they would be around and they would see me. I started playing the role of hard-core when I was 10 years old.

Gang research generally suggests that "gang neighborhoods are female-based in the home and youth-dominated on the streets" (Cartwright et al. 1975:65); and in such neighborhoods, self-identity becomes, for many young males, a street-based process. In short, the role of older youths and peers, especially in its organized gang form,
becomes a dominant street force in the continuity of one's experience in shaping a self-identity (Erikson 1956).

Enculturation to street values and customs proceeds apace with their social interactions and networks. Fear is omnipresent in street life, especially if one is unprotected, and must be managed. Thus, being and acting "tough" has become a focal street value, as Miller (1959) noted in studying East Coast youth, and a salient aspect of gang members' behavior. A youth's meaning of self is affected by his concern for being "tough," especially insofar as outsiders label him as such and he responds affirmatively (Bliss 1977; Tangri and Schwartz 1967).

Toughness affords some gang members more than relief from fear, of course. As one male, 24, from downtown Los Angeles put it in an interview:

I was born into my barrio. It was either get your ass kicked every day or join a gang and get your ass kicked occasionally by rival gangs. Besides, it was fun and I belonged.

The "fun" for such members results not only from venting aggression and a sense of adventure, but also from the emotional support that gang camaraderie provides. Toughness also promotes some sense of responsibility. It certainly helps to calm one's fears if street peers can be relied on for help, but to expect and receive that kind of support requires that one must also show reliability and dependability in similar circumstances. Toughness is also the gang behavior pattern most accessible for those youths who have had particularly distressing early childhoods. It is much easier for them to value and demonstrate this gang feature; as locos (crazies) and leaders, it is an avenue for personal expression that uplifts the ego, enabling them to appear successful in at least one arena. Striking fear into the hearts of others is a defensive action much like beating someone to the punch. For many gang members who are small in stature or weak in physical strength, the gang is a crucial haven; and being able to act loco is even more important to them. Acting tough affords them pride, with the assurance of being backed by the gang if trouble arises. Occasional recourse to the use of weapons is an extension of this pattern.

To gain acceptance from peers, an individual will adopt behavior patterns that initially have little intrinsic meaning to him, and perhaps might even be repugnant, but nevertheless are requisites for
gang membership; for example, showing that one can feel, act, and look hard or uncaring. It often is the case that joining a gang and wanting to act "bad" (a term that reflects a quality of toughness and, by extension, desirable things in general, especially in the eyes of the gang) stems from individuals identifying with gang members, either friends or rivals, who have acted aggressively toward them. Indeed, to alleviate the fear that is instilled by such threats, a person is forced to show that they are bad and tough, even if they are not. Destructive and violent gang actions often are nurtured in this climate of wanting to "prove" oneself.

Showing that one is tough is almost a requisite for group membership, especially with the ordeal of gang initiation, and it reflects a salient concern about toughness. One case will illustrate this point. A 22-year-old male from South Fontana followed his brother's footsteps and joined the barrio klika (clique or cohort). He recalled his feelings during an interview:

If anybody threatens a member we had to get together and beat the guys near to death. That's when you show how tough you are, because you have to be tough to make it in this world.

Sometimes the explanation underscores the deeper aggressive motives which some members have about identifying with the gang, such as "if I were killed, I would go down with pride." Usually the question of individual pride is cast in group terms, because group reciprocity, or reaction, toward the person is what sharpens self-identification processes. This type of interaction exemplifies the nexus of personal and social features. A 19-year-old male member from Chino, who was socialized early and remained attached to the gang, gave a rather interesting explanation of this pheneomenon in an interview:

If any intruder enters, we get panicked because we feel our community is being threatened. The only way is with violence. We can't talk because of our pride and their pride. No Chicano's going to lay his pride on the line so another can suck it up and make his pride bigger.

There is strong evidence that shows that gang members, as one 18-year-old male from Ontario said, "joined the gang for my ego to go higher." Some individuals even lamented that they were a "nobody" before. Of course, social activities, like parties and car cruising, made for ego enhancement and identity, but the gang was also adaptive because it provided protection from neighboring barrio
gangs. Through long exposure to barrio associates, certain individuals’ egos became submerged in the barrio (group) and its activities.

A youth’s management of his self-identity crisis through gang channels may be only temporary or superficial and may stem from his feared or real identities. This tendency is reflected in the lives of fringe gang members, whose backgrounds might be only moderately problematic, but who are still affected by the gangs (as the ideal identity). Two cases can illustrate this point. The first, a 20-year-old male from Chino, joined the gang in high school “to feel good because someone is behind you.” Soon after a subsequent gang-related brush with the law, he decided to leave and explained it in this way: “I never made it as a true gang member.” Although his feared identity had motivated him, he eventually found the gang ideal was too demanding. The other case, a Latino immigrant, 16, is interesting because it reflects developments in that population. He became part of the gang in order to meld into the social environment (ideal identity) of downtown Los Angeles. He would dress and act like a *cholo* to feel “together” and avoid fights.

I liked being part of the gang. When I would dress and act like a cholo I would feel together and tough. All I’d have to do was act cool and not stare at anybody. Whenever there was a chance for a fight, you would get out of it by just acting this way.

With some strong family prodding, he left the group in high school, as the coping strategy of gang identification brought more problems than it solved. This experience appears to be common in those areas of Los Angeles where immigrant youths have had to adapt and adjust to the street gang style (feared and real identities are strong motives for seeking an ideal identity); one Latino youth even said that gangbanging (fighting) is like “showing you are American,” or assimilated. Most who become at all involved with a gang lifestyle usually flirt with the gang ideal or organize their own version of a “pseudo-gang,” more social group than street gang, as Cordero’s study of this group (1980) suggests.

In tracing the backgrounds of these youths, it is clear that macro-level structural and historical forces are at the root of the gang phenomenon. Subjective, psychological motivations and needs to identify and associate with the gang emanate from such sociocultural sources. In this regard, at least, the gang youth’s self-identification reflects a more generally applicable pattern of adolescence: the peer
group assumes the responsibility of assisting a person with identity formation.

To keep themselves together they temporarily overidentify, to the point of apparent complete loss of identity, with the heroes of cliques and crowds. . .[and they] arrive at a definition of one’s identity by projecting one’s diffused ego image on another and by seeking it thus reflected and gradually clarified. [Erikson 1963:262]

IDENTITY AND “PSYCHOSOCIAL MORATORIUM”

Adolescence is generally a transitional, marginal period where experimentation with new roles is expected and usually enacted. For some Chicano youths, this life stage has been affected by the peculiar nature of cholo life: nagging economic and social stresses and street pressures contribute to a sense of psychocultural conflict and unsteadiness (Barrera, Zautra, and Baca 1984; Mendoza 1981). During the “psychosocial moratorium” stage of adolescence many childhood problems need to be readdressed and, in addition, new demands are made on the growing individual. This self-identity clarification phase is, of course, exacerbated by the preceding unresolved familial crises and the pressures and demands of street conditions. Role diffusion and ambiguity are common difficulties in the adolescent phase of ego development, especially in terms of age and sex identity. Erikson (1963:262) noted that, “the danger of this stage is role confusion where this is based on a strong previous doubt as to one’s sexual identity.” For many gang members raised in female-centered households, where adult male models were absent or transient, real (female-raised) and feared (weak) identities come into conflict with the ideal (male, strong) identity that the street gangs represent; Morales (1982:150) provides an excellent case example of this phenomenon. To underscore this point, a male, 16, recalled in an interview a rather symbolic event (at the age of 13).

I remember my Mom used to comb my hair. It ain’t really nothing special. I always wish I could go back to those days when my Mom would wake me up in the morning. She would play some Spanish music on radio KALI and she would get dressed and cook breakfast, comb our hair. I remember she used to comb it to the sides. So one day I took the comb from her and started combing it back. That’s when I started thinking I was all chingon (tough guy, in control).

Soon after he was initiated into the gang.

Aggressive masculine behavior is socioculturally constructed because of its utility in aiding one’s survival in the street life of the
barrio. As one male interviewee, 23, from El Hoyo Maravilla said, "Chingazos [blows, fighting] is a way of life here. In other neighborhoods boys talk about the Dodgers or football." Male youngsters who are having difficulty in their attempts to reconcile the feared self (weak, vulnerable) with the ideal self (tough male role model) and to bring the real self (striving for toughness) closer to the ideal, utilize the culture construct to adopt attitudes and behavior that overemphasize "male" survival qualities; or as Erikson has suggested in the context of bisexual diffusion (1956:10): "to be a little less of one means to be much more of the other—or, rather, to be a little less of one means to be all of the other." Non-family male street models are the "ideal" source of these patterns. The mutually reinforcing sociocultural and psychological factors in a gang youth's self-identity reveal a general phenomenon that Devereaux has discussed: "Each intrapsychic development mobilizes certain reinforcing cultural mandates and each cultural response mobilizes reinforcing subjective motives and process" (1961:231).

The setting and situations for peer interaction among members of a gang vary, but a salient concern for most of them in all instances is how a person handles the "masculine" construct that both assures fear (or gives that impression) and aids street survival. Casual conversation and joking, often verbal repartee, drinking beer or wine, playing pick-up games (baseball, basketball, football, handball), and meeting at the local barrio hangout are what gang members do most of the time. For example, all-day rebote (handball) games provide opportunities for one to gain peer respect and approval, group support and acceptance, and a sense of security and protection. Play and loose socializing among young males in general consists of reality testing on a number of dimensions, including learning group norms and beliefs, especially how to think and act in ways appropriate to one's sex and age (Rogoff 1981; Whiting 1980); even a struggling handball player must endure catcalls and friendly remonstrances—for example, "juegas como chavala" ("you play like a girl")—to measure up to the older, more experienced players.

In addition to these patterns, gangs engage in the less widely accepted activities that have gained the public's attention, but which are so essential to fear management and street dangers, of violence against others in the form of rampant gang fighting and slayings, and against oneself through the careless use of drugs and alcohol.
These stem, in large part, from tradition (that is, gang lore and mythology, intergenerational influences) and technology (violent imagery in movies and television, availability of guns, and mind-altering chemical substances). Thus, for example, many informants' compelling explanations of the gang's attraction showed that older relatives and male models, violent gangster movies, and the reputation, enhancement and excitement associated with drug use and gun display were strong factors.

Even these activities can be understood as an altered type of "storm and stress" response during adolescence when daring, excitement, courage, and adventure are valued by peers; indeed, as part of the reality testing mentioned above, it is doing these "gang" things that earn you the respect and recognition as a dependable gang member with "huevos" (balls). Notwithstanding their attempts to conform to such expectations, however, most youths remain conscious of, and concerned with, the detrimental effects of this behavior. One youth complained, for example: "You know, you can't even have a wedding dance without someone getting hurt or even killed." These sentiments suggest, as Edgerton has noted in his study of deviance (1978:444), that such individual and group behavior must be viewed not as "freaks in a side show," but as "principal performers in the everyday dramas of life."

THE GROUP AS EGO IDEAL

For some barrio adolescents, self-identities are subsumed under the barrio name, as the latter becomes the group's ego ideal. Thus, when rival gang members ask a youth, "De donde eres?" (Where are you from?), he gives the name of his barrio (El Hoyo, White Fence, Cuca, Chino, or whatever barrio one belongs to). Anyone familiar with the question knows it is loaded to mean gang affiliation, not where you live or just came from. The gang youth will typically proclaim his barrio with a pride despite the danger of violence. A non-member, on the other hand, will typically reply, "nowhere."

Growing up in the barrio and becoming socialized and enculturated to street peer networks and beliefs makes an individual group-oriented early in life. The barrio group becomes a substitute for the many caretakers who have failed, a functional equivalent to the family, schools, and other institutions, and provides norms and patterns for emotional stability, social interaction and friendship, protection, and street survival (a tough "male" identity). Youths benefit by
identifying with a group ego ideal. Group associations, with group lore and role patterns, provide the directions for thought and action, and, indeed, the self ideal becomes the group in the name of the barrio gang. Specific psychological needs for affection, protection, guidance, aggression, and so on, are channeled and mediated through the gang, as the latter becomes an adaptive mechanism. The result is an adolescent “psychosocial moratorium” of the sort described by Erikson (1956:6), where concerns about one’s self (ego) ideal are suspended (either temporarily or permanently, depending on the gang member) as the gang takes over and dominates self-identification (especially providing distancing from the feared self). In some ways, the group ego ideal becomes a type of higher definition of self, for a person must relinquish some independence to insure group solidarity.

Early works (Freud 1923; Scheidlinger 1952) on the interrelatedness of ego and group psychology clarified several aspects of the process of the ego ideal becoming the group ideal. Basically, a person’s self-identification is facilitated by involvement in the primary group (Freud 1923); as we have seen, the preadolescent barrio youngster models himself after others in the immediate spatial and social environment, and increasingly so during adolescence. Once a person joins a group, he identifies with the norms and standards of the group and makes the group his ego ideal. Scheidlinger, in his summary of works on this subject, found that several ego-supportive outlets and needs are found in the peer group. He lists those features as follows: “Protection, security, and affection; positive personal ties; shared ideals and interests; climate of equality and justice; symbolic group ceremonials and activities; and common enemies outside of the group” (1952:141–142). Meeting these criteria, the gang has become a strong group ideal. The sociopsychological dimension to such group bonding, reflected in the libidinal ties (affection, emotional concern and support) members have for one another, reinforces social structural aspects ([Suttles 1968 complementary opposition to territorial outsiders) of group bonding.

Group terminology reflects this sense of emotional attachment. Members regularly refer to each other as carnales (brothers, of the same blood), camaradas (comrades), and homeboys (of the same barrio), indicating a type of fictive kinship (Moore, Vigil, and Garcia 1983). Thus, the Chicano gang can be seen as a primary group of
the sort that Freud (1923:48) characterized as: "a number of individuals who have put one and the same object in the place of their ego ideal and have consequently identified themselves with one another in their ego." This grouping tendency appears to correspond with the strong sense of familialism among Chicanos (Mirande and Enríquez 1979; Baca Zinn 1975), perhaps indicative of what Colman (1975:45) refers to as a propensity among certain cultures to value group and extended family ties. This is especially the case in deeply rooted, isolated barrios, where gang members rely on each other as family members, as these words of a male, 16, from Cuacamonga affirmed during an interview: "Even close friends become like a part of the familia."

Much of the personal demonstration of group loyalty and conformity helps to solidify in-group sentiments. One young man from Norco indicated in an interview that there is no "in-between, for you're either with the group or against it." Several others stressed that it is the barrio or the klika (peer group within the gang) they belong to that makes the decisions, not one individual. As one 19-year-old from Venice said: "to me it's important to go back to your neighborhood and stay right there in your neighborhood. That way you won't have no problems or anything. You know what's there, what you've got, you can go and get what you want, anywhere, anyplace."

For most gang members the barrio name, as a symbol for the group ideal, is basic to group adherence. Individuals who share a similar background identify with one another under the group label, and begin to treat one another as close friends because of the identification. In large measure, egoism is replaced by altruism, as members emphasize egalitarianism within the group; even though, in some instances, the motivation is illusory and more narcissistic in intent. Gang members flatly deny that there are leaders and they regularly talk about performing actions "for the barrio"; but unsolicited titular and situational leaders do occasionally arise despite this ideology. Generally, they are granted unofficial leadership status because they were dependable and stood up to anyone; it also helped to be a "big dude that no one would mess with." Most of these individuals were very respectful of their fellow gang members, for an overt infringement of the code of no announced leaders would be unthinkable. In this thinking process, the barrio, or the collectiv-
ity of individuals who make up the barrio group, becomes the symbolic leader. Quite often the legends and lore acquired by previous *klikas* or age grades in the barrio, amassed through past deeds and actions, and as a type of alter ego, represents a source of mythology that inspires the current barrio group to live up to the standards and reputation of the past symbolic leader (that is, the barrio itself). For example, in one downtown Los Angeles barrio, young gang members still proudly recall stories from *veteranos* (veterans, or older members) about a major gang fight that occurred ten years earlier.

Showing allegiance to the group is very important, especially at local barrio hangouts, parks, or parties, for most of the young person’s time is spent in those settings. There is casual dialogue on recent personal and barrio events among the group there, which provides an opportunity for a new member to learn the appropriate ways of thinking and behaving. Standards of posture, conversation, even reaction patterns, need to be adopted. In one instance, a young East Los Angeles gang member recalled in an interview that he was unaware of the death of one of the gang members, someone he hardly knew. When he asked about the person, an older gang member gave him a moderately stern look and replied: “He’s from the barrio, *ese* [guy].” The message was simple: anyone in the barrio is important, and you should feel what we feel about him. With casual reminders like this, a person learns to feel what the group feels. Much of the conversation on any number of topics is punctuated with gestures and looks suggesting that one knows and understands. A look or a nod of the head is often all that is needed to communicate in this affective way.

**GROUP ROLES AND SYMBOLS**

Group role patterns and role symbols facilitate self-identification, as members of a society must be able to judge the intentions of the alters with whom they interact. The ability to interact with other individuals depends on the use of a system of symbols that are understood by the members of the social group who share language, beliefs, values, and rules of behavior. The symbolic systems include language with all the nuances of style, gestures, postures, and facial expressions. [Whiting 1980:109]

It is the experienced role models, the ones with tarnished early lives and street experiences, who most influence the fringe gang members. The dress, talk, walk, and a whole set of gestures and demean-
ors of these street models are the standards for others to emulate. The cholo street style can be traced to the inventiveness of the pachuco era (Mazon 1985); although there have been variations over the years, contemporary youths carry on the tradition, speaking a type of mixed Spanish-English slang, wearing khaki pants and Pendleton shirts, with conservative, smartly combed-back hairstyle, and affecting a body language that is controlled, deliberate, and methodical. Often, these symbolic characteristics comprise a role set to be enacted, especially for those individuals whose gang involvement is of short duration. As Goffmann (1956:489) noted generally: "through demeanor the individual creates an image of himself, but properly speaking this is not an image that is meant for his own eyes." Adoption of such a role set is particularly important for individuals who reflect a type of identity dissonance and ambivalence and, as will be noted shortly, there are even rituals that help clarify this dilemma.

Group conformity, then, is enhanced with the incorporation of identifiers and symbols, which provide for group norms allowing separate persons to approximate the collective mean. It helps minimize idiosyncratic tendencies among them. Even the habit of adopting a nickname, which sometimes happens earlier in other social contexts, is often a part of the gang’s efforts to brand the person as theirs, like parents naming their children; sometimes affectionately, as in Oso (bear, if they are rotund), Huero (light-skinned, spelled the cholo way) or comically, as in Puppet, Sapito (frog, lucky or chance, also meaning little one), and Ruco (old man). Nicknaming also serves as a way of sanctioning personal quirks, peculiarities, and aggressions in the eyes of peers; Wino (drinks a lot), Loco, and Psycho are common examples. Later, to publicly advertise that the branding was successful, the person will brand his ego (or nickname) and barrio name on his body with a tattoo and on public buildings and walls with placas (graffiti). A person’s commitment to the group can be, in large part, gauged by how strongly he adheres to group traits: Are his walk, talk, and gestures more natural and of longstanding duration? Does he have more tattoos and more placasos (graffiti) in the barrio? Conversely, is the cholo style he strikes merely a temporary affectation? These visual and behavioral traits vary from individual to individual, as they do from barrio to barrio.
In sum, to learn a role one must also learn the expectations of the group. Self and group complementary roles jointly comprise the role set. For those who adopt the cholo style it is more than mere conformity; as with so many other social styles, as Goffman (1959) has argued, it is a necessary component of the role enactment, the game being played. Thus, when an actor takes on an established social role, usually he finds that a particular front has already been established for it. Whether his acquisition of the role was primarily motivated by a desire to perform the given task or by a desire to maintain the corresponding front, the actor will find that he must do both. [Goffman 1959:27]

A cholo social identity thus helps shape one's personal identity. In short, self needs the group for identity formation, and the group provides self with implicit and explicit role expectations to demonstrate group allegiance, which when enacted, show the merging of self into the group ideal of thinking and behaving.

Personal apprehension over self-identity formation is particularly allayed during an individual's "psychosocial moratorium" period, since the group roles, as exhibited by the groups' heroes (real, legendary, and imagined), provide a more or less clear framework for thinking and acting along age and sex lines; and thus a simpler, narrower range of roles from which to select. As in other societies where formalized routines exist to help this change, the role transition is aided by rites of passage; and researchers have noted this among urban gangs (Bloch and Neideroffer 1958). This ritual functions to alleviate the adolescent's role ambiguity. Group witnesses act as the public that validates that the transition has taken place, and they later hold the initiate to new role expectations. There must be a personal need to prove oneself with this ritual, and most members do so informally by showing their bravery, courage, and daring in regular street affairs, such as fighting (either minor encounters among friends or more serious aggressions against rival barrio members). Although less frequently a form of proof, members sometimes indulge in criminal activities (burglaries, robberies, shoplifting, muggings, and so on). In any event, immersion into the group, with the self (real identity) now the barrio gang (ideal identity), means that behavior is dictated by role, and thinking becomes a part of the group mentality; in effect "the individual is lost in union with others" (Colman 1975:43).
Most barrios have institutionalized a more stylized type of gang initiation ritual, which varies from one gang to another in procedures and universality of application to new members. Generally, the affair consists of a physical beating at the hands of the initiators, usually just two or three individuals but sometimes a larger group who form a gauntlet. Blows with hands and feet are permitted by both initiate and initiators. Severe beatings are rare, although one is assured of a number of bruises and abrasions. The ordeal permits the initiate to show that he can handle the new role, that is, prove his ability to fight and withstand punishment. Such a showing demonstrates one's abilities in at least one very important male, gang pattern: conflict. As a male, 17, from Varrio Nuevo explained in an interview: "I guess I took an ass whipping to be able to back up the barrio."

Regardless of the type or severity of the affair, the initiation solidifies one's association with the group and group lore (Whiting 1980:106). In particular, it affords at least partial resolution of any doubts about the initiate's commitment to toughness. Mother-centered homes and street socialization typically have made the acquisition of this aspect of sex identity even more important (Morales 1982:150). Burton and Whiting (1961) have discussed the cross-cultural association between adolescent initiation rites for males and conditions conducive to cross-sex identification problems. They state that it is "clear that the gang is an institution with a function similar to that of initiation . . . in those societies with conflict in sex identity" (1961:94; Whiting 1980). Even though not all gang members have to undergo initiation, all gangs tend to provide exclusive associations and to encourage daring behavior, thus approximating elements of the rites that Burton and Whiting report. Thus other members of the group act as a prompter or coach for the role an individual seeks, providing rewards and sanctions to insure that the role is properly enacted, and feedback to institute corrective measures.

**Locura: A Psychosocial Role Complex for Street Survival**

One role and role dynamic especially instrumental in the context of street reality is *locura*. *Locura* is a state of mind in which various quasi-controlled actions denoting a type of craziness or wildness occur. A person who is a *loco* demonstrates this state of mind by alter-
nately displaying fearlessness, toughness, daring, and other unpredictable forms of destructive behavior, such as getting “loco” on drugs and alcohol or excelling in gang-banging. Such traits are, more or less, considered as gang ideals. Some are confirmed vato locos, who can easily and authoritatively manage this role, while others only rise to the occasion when peer pressure or situational circumstances dictate a loco act. This difference reflects the distinction Edgerton (1978) makes between deviant actors and deviant acts in his study. As an example of the latter, one male, 22, from El Hoyo Maravilla stated in an interview: “I was afraid but I couldn’t be afraid. My head goes like a TV set that has poor reception with a lot of static and I got real mad and was pounding his head against the cement.”

In any event, this psychosocial role has become a requisite for street survival (fear identity); it is, moreover, a behavioral standard for identification and emulation (ideal identity). A person who is loco, either situationally or regularly, adds an important dimension to the group. This is especially the case where the barrio is beleaguered by other barrio gangs and must show a stronger force of resistance to outside challenges and pressures. The loco is a prized member of the group, for he can sometimes act as a deterrent to stave off confrontations. In one instance, a male, 26, from Carmellas (Norwalk) credits locura bravura with saving his life: “Los Nietos came into our house (at a party) and busted it up. One guy aimed a rifle to my head and waited. Then he asked me what I was thinking of. I said, ‘el fin’ (the end).” In many other instances, however, the loco can be a hindrance or detriment to the group when his unbridled actions cause unnecessary and unwanted trouble.

There is a tremendous range of locura behavior among individuals within a barrio and between barrios. The most loco members have usually undergone a traumatic life since childhood, experiencing emotional difficulties as a result of intense family and sociocultural stress. It is likely that they have internalized feelings of self-hatred, compounded by feelings of personal worthlessness and, generally, the worthlessness of others, comprising a sort of “psychosocial death.” Tico, a 22-year-old from Pico Viejo, is an example of this extreme type of vato loco. His early life was shaped by a number of rending experiences—broken family and foster-home raised, unstable and stressful socialization to public institutions, lack of a clear
ethnic identity, and many traumatic childhood incidents. He recalled in an interview a street beating at the age of nine: “Man, I got beat up by just calling him a name. He kicked and beat the heck out of me.” By the time he reached junior high school the cholo group life had become attractive, as he said: “I’m going to start doing what I want like all of these other guys [cholos]. . . . I would run away sometimes, and I would get busted for burglary.” Adapting other overt cholo visual traits and behaviors, he embarked on a life of locura. Although he considered himself a “fuck-up” since he was young, by the age of 14 he had also become a loco actor, “not scared of people, not scared of nobody. I got tired of people trying to tell me what to do. I don’t have to put up with it no more.” It is easy for such individuals to lash out at society without compunction, for the mis-treatments and aggressions they have received must find avenues for expression somewhere. Exemplifying such pathological behavior, one man, nicknamed “Psycho,” when asked if he was concerned about his having accidently wounded a 5-year-old girl during a gang-related shooting, replied: “I don’t give a fuck. Why do you think they call me Psycho?”

At the other extreme is the individual who only affects loco behavior situationally, on a gang raid, for example. A male, 18, from Ontario, described in an interview how he felt upon being pressed into a gang drive-by shooting: “I was driving and as we got closer to the (rival) barrio my heart started thumping faster. I don’t know who shot the first shot. I just kept on driving faster.” The latter is more of an instance of role enactment to insure that the group knows one is conforming to role expectations. Yet it is often true that the most loco members set the standard for other individuals in the group, and by example, prodding and daring others to follow, they can affect others to measure up to the norm.

For most of the cholos this loco role is, at best, a difficult part to play without a great deal of anxiety and apprehension attending it. Only a very few can play loco without the use of liquor and drugs, and a strong need to prove oneself. It is these substances and motivations which relieve the tension, and blur the vision to the point where a barely acceptable performance goes on. In fact, high rates of polydrug use and liquor consumption comprise a problem in its own right, with or without the intervention of group sanctioned locura role expectations or enactments. However, there are instances
in which individuals have carefully avoided doing “crazy” things for quite a long time, but in a moment of weakness, mainly when they have overindulged in drug and/or liquor use, are more easily goaded into loco behavior. One usually quiet East Los Angeles male, 19, said that when he took reds (slang for barbituates, or “downers”) “I would be transformed into the Hulk.”

Even the most outrageous display of locura, however, does not mean that one seldom demonstrates normal cholo behavior—friendship, socializing, cruising, and so on. It is just that street life and involvement with a gang, for the extreme loco, made for more situations where aggressive loco behavior comes in handy. Most of his daily life as a cholo is spent, as Tico said himself, showing that “cholos have cora (heart, empathy), too.” To reiterate, locura is a type of role behavior, among many others, available to an individual who is seeking group approval. For some persons, especially the early “psychosocial death” types, this facet of the total cholo role set is easier to perform and thus highly beneficial for gaining headway into the group; walk, talk, dress role symbols are overt, public displays which might give observers an indication of toughness, but do not require offensive actions toward oneself or others.

CONCLUSION

Cross-culturally, adolescent peer groups serve important functions in guiding youths through identity crises aroused by the emotional, physical, and social changes they encounter (Rogoff 1981). In doing so, such groups build upon a socialization process initiated much earlier by parents and families, childhood friends, neighbors, and such formalized institutions as schools. For those Chicano youths whose early experiences with families and schools have left them with intense but confused personal needs, the barrio gang provides peer group functions that may be otherwise unavailable. Discordance between ideal and feared selves can be ameliorated by adoption of the barrio as ego ideal, and the gang provides needed roles for asserting hyper-masculine behavior. At the same time the youth gains a sense of protection and belonging (perhaps for the first time). Taken together, these group functions operate to facilitate the acquisition and affirmation of a self-identity. The trade-off in making the group one’s ego ideal is group protection, alleviation of fears, and a strong sense of emotional bonding, of belongingness; and, of course, if an individual is so inclined, many group deviant activities
to act out one's frustrations, anxieties, and aggressions (Edgerton 1973).

In its broadest sense, society has failed to help certain Chicano youths develop a positive self-identity. Some of them have found what Erikson (1956:9) described for many other such youths as "a greater sense of identity in being withdrawn or in being delinquent." The social roots of this identity crisis have multiple origins, but regardless of origin, the crisis becomes especially acute during adolescence. To resolve the dilemma, the ego attaches itself to the barrio (group) ideal and the latter provides role expectations and functions to safeguard a person through this "psychosocial moratorium." In this collective effort to buy time, there are uniform (and, in fact uniformed) group ways to assure an ego identification. The psychologies of ego, role, and group must be considered jointly in this process. For some individuals, the moratorium lasts throughout their young adult life, even up to and past 30 years of age, as the gang continues to provide them with meaningful choices. The larger majority of the gang members, however, usually find a way to reconcile, or at least live with, the ambiguous nature of their identities, and mature out of the totally committed group pattern. For good or bad, the urban gang has become, for certain youths, an institution that aids adolescent passage to adulthood. Thus it must be understood as a group phenomenon reflective of varied individual inner needs, most of which are normal focal youth concerns that have been altered by the peculiar nature of barrio life.

NOTES

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4The gang members whose life histories were collected in connection with this study came from households with average incomes one-fourth lower ($11,843 per annum versus $15,531)
than other Spanish-surnamed households in Los Angeles county and households twice as large (8.4 members versus 4.1). Forty percent of these households (more than double the proportion in other Spanish-surnamed households) were headed by a female parent. (Comparison figures are taken from 1980 Census of Population and Housing—Los Angeles and Long Beach, California. PHC 80-2-226. Washington: U.S. Department of Commerce, 1983.

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