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Self Definition by Rejection: The Case of Gang Girls*

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I use material obtained from a two-year participant observational study of girl gang members to examine how their structural position as poor, Puerto Rican, and female affects their self presentation in social talk. Much of their sense of individuality results from their rejection of aspects of identity associated with that social position. Their self definition is realized not through the construction of a fully integrated “deviant” personality but through piecemeal rejection of various components of stereotypes about poor, Puerto Rican women. I suggest that closer examination of gossip and “put downs” can illuminate how one’s one identity is constructed through the vilification of others’ actions and character.

Although there is evidence that young women have participated in urban street gangs since the mid-nineteenth century (Asbury, 1970; Salisbury, 1958; Thrasher, 1927), it is only recently that they have received attention as a topic of study in their own right. Prior to the 1970s, female gangs were usually treated as journalistic curiosities (Hanson, 1964; Rice, 1963) or as footnotes to the study of male gangs (Cohen, 1955; Cohen and Short, 1958; Short and Strodtbeck, 1965; Thrasher, 1927). Two themes are apparent in much of this early work: the psychological problems and inappropriate sex-role behavior of female gang members.

Psychological studies portrayed female gang members as immature, anxious, and maladjusted (Thompson and Lozes, 1976), as relatively low in intelligence (Rice, 1963), and as socially inept and sexually promiscuous (Ackley and Fliegel, 1960; Cohen, 1955; Welfare Council of New York City, 1950). Thus, this early research attributed many of the same characteristics to gang members which were used to describe female delinquents in general (Smart, 1976). However, Bowker and Klein (1983) reanalyzed data from the 1960s and found only trivial differences between gang and non-gang girls on a variety of psychological tests.

Early studies by social workers and sociologists tended to decontextualize the behavior of ghetto girls and to compare it unfavorably with middle-class stereotypes of femininity. Social workers placed particular emphasis upon gang girls’ slipshod appearance, their preference for pants over skirts, and their poor personal hygiene, posture, and manners (Ackley and Fliegel, 1960; Hanson, 1964). Girls’ failures in these areas were taken as indications of low self-esteem, prompting remedial efforts to turn them into young ladies (Short and Strodtbeck, 1965). These departures from appropriate feminine behavior were also seen as the surface manifestations of a more profound problem: their promiscuity. Although the evidence for this was drawn from a highly questionable source—reports of male gang members—the promiscuity of gang girls was highlighted in Cohen’s (1955) theoretical analysis of working-class delinquency. He argued that because emotional and romantic conquests are the female counterpart of societal achievement among boys, these young women expressed their rejection of the “middle-class measuring rod” by freely dispensing sexual favors. Thus, while boys boast about delinquent acts in order to achieve masculine status within their own oppositional subculture, girls should logically flaunt their promiscuity as a badge of their oppositional female identity.

Examination of the slim quantity of ethnographic work on delinquent and gang girls in fact suggests that this is not the case. The social talk of delinquent girls generally shows that

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they not only reject sexual activity outside the context of a steady relationship but even reject friendships with “loose” girls whose reputation might contaminate them by association (Smith, 1978; Wilson, 1978). Horowitz (1983) reinforces this point in her examination of barrio lifestyles of teenage girls in Chicago. As part of the Chicano culture, they must maintain the appearance of virginity and restraint even though the broader U.S. culture encourages and condones sexual experience. The girls manage this contradiction by ascribing pregnancy to momentary passion in the context of a love relationship (the use of contraception would imply a cold-blooded and more permanent commitment to sexual experience). They can maintain their “virgin” status even after motherhood if their public demeanor continues to emphasize their commitment to motherhood and rejection of casual sexual adventures.

Female members of New York street gangs described in this paper had club rules which explicitly required serial monogamy, and girls who spread their sexual attentions too far were disciplined by the gang’s “godmother.” The pejorative potency of terms such as “whore” and “slut” is clearly seen in the way these teenage girls used such terms to characterize their enemies and rivals, and epithets such as these are often the triggers which spark female fights (Campbell 1986). It was this observation that gave rise to the present study: The words and typifications we use to characterize our enemies are often an important guide to the ascriptions we most reject in ourselves. By extension, our self concept may evolve from our rejection of such negative personal attributes rather than from the active construction of a social identity.

Using data from Puerto Rican gang members, I show how the girls’ sense of self as gang members is derived from their rejection of various aspects of membership of three interlocking societal identities: class, race, and gender. They arrive at a female gang identity by default rather than by affirmation. The fragmented and reactive nature of their self definition helps to make sense of many of the contradictions which are present in the social talk of the gang girl. By “backing away” from one aspect of an assigned role, she may run the risk of being cast in another unacceptable role from which she must also extricate herself. For example, in rejecting women’s passivity toward men, a girl may endorse her support for abortion. However, in doing so, she risks being seen as cheap or as a bad mother. Her support for abortion in one context may be withdrawn in another. To achieve self-presentational consistency, the individual must have formed a coherent schema of her ideal self to which she refers. As long as her self presentation depends upon rejecting an interlocking set of actions or qualities, she is likely to find herself escaping from one rejected identity but risking entry into another. The point is that not all components of a given role are rejected; indeed, it is hard to imagine what the result of such a total rejection would be. The girls accept the desirability of some aspects of femininity, class, or ethnicity but reject others. Essentially they are saying, “I am not that kind of woman,” which is very different from saying, “I am not a woman.”

In focusing upon self presentation through the words of the social actors themselves, the present study has much in common with the study of accounts (Goffman, 1959; Scott and Lyman, 1968). Accounts are usually given by actors in anticipation of or in response to listeners’ negative evaluation of the actors’ behavior. They are the means by which actors excuse or justify instances of untoward behavior. Stokes and Hewitt (1976) go further to argue that accounts serve to reconcile prevailing norms with innovative or deviant behavior and, over time, can alter group norms. In the case of delinquency, Sykes and Matza (1957) describe various “techniques of neutralization” which deny the wrongfulness of crime or justify it with respect to some superordinate value. My analysis of gang girls’ accounts differs in three major respects from this tradition. First, I focus on social identities rather than on discrete actions. Girls see actions as characteristic of certain types of person and they vilify these behaviors not for their own sake but because they are the manifestations of a rejected identity. This idea is tacitly embodied in some of Sykes and Matza’s (1957) justifications and excuses. For example, an “appeal to higher loyalties” often invokes reference to the overriding importance of group
solidarity, which can be seen from the present perspective as colloquially indicating "I am not the kind of person who deserts my buddies." Second, the accounts I describe are not directed only at anti-social behaviors. The qualities which gang girls reject include passivity, subservience, and provincialism as well as drug addiction and prostitution. Tension exists not only between deviance and respectability but also between old-fashioned and modern values, between poverty and glamour. Third, while accounts are usually efforts to justify the speaker's own behavior, I focus mainly on disparagement of others' behavior. That is, I am concerned with gossip and "put-downs." As Moore (1978:52) notes: "Gossip, heavily judgmental, is at the heart of much sociability at the frequent parties. Gossip is fun. It also means that everybody—adult and adolescent—has a 'reputation' that is continuously shifting and renewed."

This putting-down of others is a crucial component of the establishment of a self image. To accuse neighboring gang members of being "whores" or "glue sniffers" clearly announces that the speaker denies the applicability of such terms to herself. Analysis of the vilification of others is not only a useful methodological tool, but this process of symbolic rejection may be at the heart of how gang girls arrive at their own self definition. They do not actively work at constructing a coherent female group image but rather arrive at one by default as they reject components of the identities they attribute to others.

Method

Between 1979 and 1981 I attached myself to three New York City female gangs as a participant observer. During the first six month of research, I made initial contacts with a number of city gangs through site visits to gang outreach programs and introductions arranged by the New York Gang Crimes Unit. At the end of this period, I selected three gangs for in-depth observation and subsequently spent six months with each of them. In each case, I selected one girl as the focus of the research and spent approximately four days-a-week with her in day-to-day activities—during the course of which I came to meet her fellow gang members, family, and neighbors. Whenever possible I tape-recorded dialogues between individual girls and myself, as well as group interactions between the girls and between female and male members. I augment my analysis of these recordings with material from my field notes.

One of the three groups I studied was the Five Percenters, a black Islamic movement organized into gang-like structures in a number of East Coast cities. However, I restrict my focus here to the accounts of Puerto Rican gang members, the majority of whom belonged to the Sex Girls and the Sandman Ladies. As with female gangs described in other major cities (Miller, 1975; Quicker, 1984), both gangs were affiliated with previously established male gangs and adopted a feminized version of the male gang's name. Female members constituted approximately 10 percent of gang membership in the city (Collins, 1979). The girls had their own leader and made most of their decisions independently of the males, including the acceptance, initiation, and discipline of their members. Gang members ranged in age from 12 to 28.

The Sandman Ladies were located on the west side of Manhattan with headquarters in the apartment of the female and male leaders (a married couple) in a housing project. They referred to themselves as a club or a family rather than as a gang, and identified themselves as "bikers"—although the 20 male and 11 female members possessed only one working motorcycle between them. Their primary source of income was from street sales of marijuana, augmented by burglary and by hiring themselves out to protect cocaine sellers in the mid-town area.

The Sex Girls were located in the East New York section of Brooklyn and most of the

1. For a fuller account of these gangs see Campbell (1984).
members lived within a few blocks of their clubhouse—one of the many abandoned buildings in the neighborhood. Their male counterparts named themselves the Sex Boys in honor of one of the local streets (Essex Street) when they split from the Ghetto Brothers in 1972. The male and female gangs were in a state of decline by 1979. A number of members were dead or imprisoned, and the formal structure of the gangs was in disarray. Although the Sex Girls allegedly had 50 members in the mid-1970s, their numbers had declined to about 10 by the time of my research. The gangs' main source of revenue was drug dealing. During my field work, they were involved in a dispute with an Italian group of dealers over territorial rights to selling, which resulted in the deaths of three of the male members. Their income was augmented by petty criminality such as stripping cars and abandoned buildings.

A content analysis of the verbal "put downs" that appeared in the social talk of gang girls revealed 10 recurrent topics. In each of these, the girls expressed rejection of specific behaviors or qualities and clearly identified themselves as distinct from individuals who could be characterized by them. For ease of presentation, I have conceptualized them as shown in Figure 1 as locations in a matrix of three interlocking structural variables: poverty, ethnicity, and gender. It should be stressed that this conceptualization is mine and did not arise explicitly from the girls themselves. Rather these topics of social talk occurred sporadically throughout my field work and the girls themselves did not specifically relate any given "put-down" to these sociological categories. It should also be noted that the diagrammatic representation is not meant to imply that all three components contribute equally to self definition. For some girls, being female seemed superordinate to being poor or Puerto Rican while for others it was not.2

Ethnicity

Anachronistic Values and Social Monitoring

Many gang members were born in Puerto Rico or have visited the island frequently to stay with relatives. As with any immigrant group, their feelings for the homeland tend to be mixed. Often the gang members would talk nostalgically of the sunshine and the fruit growing wild on the trees. Such positive recollections were usually tempered with less pleasant memories of poverty: the lack of indoor plumbing, the perpetual diet of rice and beans, the lack of new clothes or shoes. Aside from the material deprivation they associated with the island, gang members often expressed the views that Puerto Rico continued to adhere to anachronistic moral values and that islanders were old fashioned in comparison with New Yorkers. For example, many of the gang members who returned to the island for vacations were shocked at the great importance local police attached to marijuana possession. The girls saw the tough enforcement and stiff penalties as indicative of the old fashioned attitude of their homeland. In contrast, they viewed the ready availability of "herb" in corner stores in New York City as an indication of a more progressive and liberal attitude toward marijuana on the mainland. The rigid moral values in Puerto Rico prohibited many of the activities that the girls found most attractive in New York—hanging out in the street, dressing fashionably, flirting, drinking, getting "high," and attending parties. When they stayed with relatives on the island, they were required to come home early and to help with household chores. Some girls said their New York clothing caused consternation among their Puerto Rican kin. The girls' parents seemed to share such views, in that a frequent response to the girls' misbehavior was to send them to stay with relatives on the island. Girls who were associating with unde-

2. There is, of course, considerable scholarly debate as to the primacy of each of these factors, and researchers in women's studies, minority studies, and economics would certainly disagree as to the relative influence of gender, race, and class on lifestyles and self-conceptions.
sirable boys, who became pregnant, or who were beyond the control of their parents were often shipped back to Puerto Rico where they would be less tempted by the freedom of the mainland.

The girls also noted that these traditional conceptions of appropriate behavior were enforced by claustrophobic social monitoring which was conspicuously absent in their life in New York. The girls viewed the anonymity and mobility of city life as reflections of the progressive values of the United States. Gang members often complained about the confining tightness of social controls on the island. As one girl put it:

Puerto Ricans are very simple minded and the atmosphere is very, very close—and that's ideal for whoever likes to be close to people. Not me, I personally like New York. It's very cold and people think twice about speaking to you. I don't like being watched. Over there close communities everywhere you go. Everybody knows everything. I can't deal with that. This is the only place where you can come here and be yourself to an extreme but you can still be a faggot—that's an extreme. Or bitch. Dress that way, and I'm not saying it's going to be accepted by everybody, but you can still survive. Feel your identity—whether it be religion or whatever.

Figure 1 * The Female Gang member in Relation to Definition-by-Rejection Qualities of Alternative Membership Groups.
The tension between the sense of belonging associated with these extended networks and discomfort with their tight social monitoring has also been noted by Horowitz (1983) in her ethnographic research on Chicanas.

**Immigrants**

Gang members more than anything else see themselves as American and identify strongly with the special reputation of New York. They are not “hicks” but street-wise people who cannot be tricked, conned, or fooled. They know all the hustles and are not taken in by them. They strongly reject the old superstitions of the island which they see as evidence of its backward status. For example, many villagers in Puerto Rico continue to believe in “esperititas”—that curses can be placed upon individuals and only be removed through consultation with mediums who locate the source of the curse. The curse can then be lifted by the use of candles and herbs purchased from the local bontanica. Although botanicas exist in New York City, they are supported by older Puerto Ricans who are unwilling to openly discount the supernatural. However, gang members saw these beliefs as anachronistic and provincial. In seeking revenge over a rival, they were far more likely to fight it out or “drop a dime” (inform on them) to the police.

In stressing their status as Americans and their superiority over other more recently arrived immigrants, gang members took particular pride in the commonwealth relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States. They viewed the fact that they could come and go from the island without visas as evidence that they were not “immigrants.” They saw other newcomers to the city such as Haitians, Dominicans, and Cubans as naive, provincial, and backward in their outlook. As one girl observed:

America doesn’t really want foreigners like me coming in, but right now Puerto Rico isn’t foreign. Yeah. Dominican. Cuban. All those kinds of people. They came by boat. They can come on a boat from Santo Domingo or Puerto Rico. A lot of them get caught though, but a lot of them get in. And that’s what fucks up the country. . . . Well, now the Blacks and Puerto Ricans don’t have anything to worry about—it’s the Cubans now. You know I saw a movie and it said if there were no niggers, we’d have to invent them. Do you know what? The Cubans are taking over the oppressed group now.

A source of particular irritation was the inability of some of these newly arrived groups to speak English. This was particularly striking because many of the gang members themselves spoke “Spanglish,” switching from one language to another—sometimes in mid-sentence. Nevertheless, their pride in their children’s ability to speak and write standard English was evident, and they were often apologetic about their parents’ inability to converse in anything but Spanish. For gang members, assimilation into mainstream American life was demonstrated by fluency in English which at the same time indicated the acquisition of “advanced” material values and skills.

**Poverty**

**Drabness**

The majority of gang members came from families that received welfare assistance and lived in communities where this was the norm. The families of many gang members were female-headed, and the mother often represented the only constant parent in the girl’s life. Many of the girls themselves had their first child during their teenage years, after which they either lived at home, sharing child-rearing duties with their mother, or moved into a local apartment with the child’s father. Gang girls with children were in the more secure position of receiving AFDC checks, but they still relied on their wits (or those of their boyfriends) to
provide for any unanticipated expenses. Consequently, males who had successful hustles were a prized commodity and addicted males were considered a liability since any income they might obtain was spent on heroin. The boys would hustle money on a day-to-day basis by stripping abandoned buildings, selling marijuana, or rolling drunks. Girls did not draw distinctions between legal and illegal income—provided the latter did not invite police attention. The frequent crises of poverty were managed by circles of relatives and neighbors who relied on one another to borrow and lend food or money until the arrival of the next check (Lewis, 1965; Sheehan, 1976). Life on a shoestring budget meant that there were frequent trips to corner stores to buy items of food, often at inflated prices.

After motherhood, the girls rarely considered taking up employment. They saw their duty as first and foremost to their children, and their role as mothers not only provided a measure of dignity but a legitimate reprieve from the alien world of work. Their low level of literacy and lack of high school diploma meant that they would be eligible only for manual work paying minimum wages. Such jobs would not add sufficiently to the quality of their life to justify leaving their children. Besides, the girls were clearly apprehensive about employment, since most of them had never held a job and doing so would mean leaving their immediate neighborhood. Gang members rarely ventured beyond a few blocks radius from their homes, and the principal source of influence from beyond the neighborhood was television. The girls avidly watched soap operas and game shows during the day. Their favorite shows were filled with images of glamour and conspicuous consumption in which women were either kept in limitless luxury by men or worked in highly attractive jobs. It is perhaps not surprising that, when queried about the kind of job they would like, gang members frequently cited dancing, singing, and modeling (see McRobbie, 1978). The contrast between these aspirations and their actual job opportunities was striking and typified their rejection of any image of themselves as poor or drab. If work entailed menial labor, they would rather remain at home where their role as mothers engendered a measure of respect.

A good deal of their self presentation involved an image of devil-may-care casualness about the reckless spending of unanticipated income. They spent unexpected money immediately on drugs or alcohol and on trips to movies and steak houses. Many commentators on ghetto life have taken this as evidence of an inability to plan, save, or defer the gratification of immediate pleasure (see Meissner, 1966). When viewed as part of the development of self image by rejection, the spending of money on glamorous leisure experiences represents the denial, albeit temporary, or the conception of themselves as poor.

**Slovenliness**

Gang members also place considerable emphasis upon the purchase of the “right” brand names in jeans, sneakers, alcohol, and stereo equipment. They considered it particularly important that their children dressed well, especially at Easter, and they spent large sums of money on clothes that children would outgrow within a few months. They refused second-hand clothes as indicative of the poverty which they made every effort to deny:

Your kid might come home and say, “Mom, you got to buy me $30 sneakers. $2.99 sneakers ain’t doing it for me. I just can’t stand criticism any more. You have to buy me $30 sneakers.” What do you do? You go out there and you try to get them for your kids—the best way you can, the best way you know how or something.

Their effort to distance themselves from poverty stereotypes was reflected in great concern about cleanliness in appearance. Although they sometimes referred to themselves as “outlaws,” they never displayed the disregard for personal hygiene and appearance that has been described among biker groups like the Hells Angels (Thompson, 1967). Getting ready to “hang out” often took some time because the girls were so meticulous about their clothing and make-up. Jeans were dry cleaned rather than washed, and boots were oiled and sneakers
whitened every day. Some gang girls rejected the wearing of “colors” because they felt it made them look cheap and dirty. They wore the full uniform of boots, jackets, and scarves only when they anticipated a run-in with a neighboring girl gang:

We used to wear hankies over here, hankies over here. Pockets, on necks, pants, hats, all over. I used to think “Oh that’s bad. That’s nice.” But then I realized, “Look at me. I’m a girl. That doesn’t look right.” Like, “Look at that little tramp or whore”. . . . You know—my jacket, my jacket, my clothes. I never like to wear them. Only when I’m going to fight or rumble, something like that.

Drug Addicts

The poverty-level Puerto Rican neighborhoods in which these gang members lived had high levels of crime and drug addiction. The fact that the girls belonged to highly visible gangs meant that they were viewed by the police and the community as being involved in both of these activities. The girls denied this. When they talked about drug abuse, they drew a clear line between recreational use and addiction. Marijuana was both used and sold by gang members and its place in their life was as uncontroversial as that of alcohol. They occasionally used LSD and amphetamines at parties. However, heroin use was strongly condemned. While some girls had experimented with “skin popping,” they viewed intravenous injection of the drug as the index of real dependence. The girls took pains to distance themselves from any such involvement. Heroin users were seen as undependable, capricious, and irresponsible, and they were generally not welcome within the gang. They frequently stole from other members, failed to pay back loans, and were unavailable when needed for defense of the neighborhood. In spite of such vocal condemnation of heroin users, a number of the gang members were enrolled in methadone programs and had relapses into heroin use.

The gang placed firm demands for reform upon such members. As one female leader told an addict who wanted to rejoin the gang after leaving temporarily during a bout of heroin use:

It’s harder coming back the second time. I watch you more. You were fucking up a lot before, you were always nodding. Always told to shut up and you didn’t listen. If you blend, you blend. If you don’t, you don’t. You’ve been to a different place. So just pretend you never left. Don’t be talking about it. I don’t want to hear anything you’ve got to say.

A few days later, the girl stole three pairs of jeans and disappeared, confirming once again the gang’s mistrust of an addict’s commitment to anyone but herself. Significantly, a term of disparagement frequently leveled against rival gangs was that they were “dope fiends” or “glue sniffers.”

Criminals

The girls did not consider many victimless offenses as criminal in spite of the fact that they might be against the law. These included drug selling, inter-gang warfare, organized crime, prostitution, domestic violence, stripping of abandoned buildings and automobiles, shoplifting, and burglary of businesses. Nevertheless, gang members assumed a condemnatory stance toward people they defined as “criminals.” To affirm their own exclusion from this category, they employed a number of self-presentation devices. They symbolically distanced themselves from criminals by reserving the term for “crazy” people—e.g., Charles Manson or David Berkowitz. Criminals also included rapists and child molesters. Nevertheless, gang members were still left with the problem of accounting for their residential burglaries and

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3. It should be born in mind that gang members themselves are not exempt from victimization. When one of the gang girls was the victim of an attempted rape, it was clear to gang members that the perpetrators were “criminals.”
robberies which by their own definition were wrong. They achieved this through the use of two favored techniques of neutralization: appeal to necessity and denial of responsibility (see Sykes and Matza, 1957). In the first case, they often justified property offenses with reference to a temporary financial crisis which left them no other option. In the second, they argued that they were “crazy” from drugs or alcohol while committing the act. However, neither of these justifications was accepted if the crime was committed on the gang’s own turf:

It was this old lady, she had a bunch of money in her pocket and we was on the corner, you know. We seen the money and I told Little Man, “Come on, Little Man, you want to do it? Let’s take the money.” So this old lady we know for a long time. She was a little bit crazy. I said “Come on Little Man, let’s do it.” Then she walked to the corner and we walked to the corner, right? And then we grab her and took the money but it was on the same block. The cops came and everything but we did it wrong because it was on the same block, so then Danny didn’t like it. He started to scream at me, but he wasn’t my [the girl gang’s] leader, he can’t do nothing.

Members accounted for their gang’s existence by pointing out the jungle-like quality of city life. Similarly to male members of the Lions in Chicago (Horowitz, 1983), they noted the high local crime rate and the need for some form of protection for themselves and their children. Frequently, the presence of rival gangs was given as their raison d’etre. They reasoned that since the other gang had “hardware” they had no option but to arm themselves also. As they saw it, they represented a vigilante force on behalf not only of themselves but of friends and neighbors too. In this regard, they felt a sense of cooperative rivalry with the police. The gang too was in the business of maintaining security, and the police frequently came to them to seek information on the perpetrators of neighborhood crime. As one member boasted:

What the community cannot get to, I can get to. Sometimes the cops come in and nobody will tell them a goddamn thing. Nobody is going to tell nothing—even to save their hide, they won’t tell them—but I will come along and they will tell me. They will open up to me because they know, having gone through that shit, everybody opens up willing. They let me know what’s up and that way I bring up what happened [to the police].

Because of their cooperation—at least in instances where the crime in question was not committed by them and especially where it was perpetrated by another gang or by competing drug sellers—they saw themselves as under-cover assistants. Accordingly, they were outraged when the police arrested one of them. They felt betrayed and pointed out that the local precinct house would be unable to keep order in the neighborhood without their help.

The Guardian Angels represented a major thorn in their side. The media portrayed the Angels as “good” kids, but the gang members believed that this group received disproportionate credit for its crime control efforts. They often accused the Angels of perpetrating as much crime as they prevented:

The Guardian Angels got media recognition, they got everything now. They say they’re this and they are that, that they’re protecting the subway. That’s bullshit, man. That’s bullshit, right. They’ve already gotten busted for ripping somebody off on the subway, with their shit on, with their berets and their Magnificent Thirteen T-shirts and all their bullshit.

At the same time, gang members resented their own media image as “bad kids” and believed the press was conspiring to deny them appropriate publicity.

Femininity

Bad Mothers

Much has been written about motherhood as an important rite of passage among disadvantaged teenage girls (Rainwater, 1960; Stack, 1974; Staples, 1971; Sullivan, 1985). From an
early age gang girls assisted in the raising of their younger siblings, although often with considerable ambivalence, and their own sexual experimentation began early. Many gang girls had their first intercourse at or before puberty and, consequently, pregnancy by the age of 15 was not uncommon. In New York City, about half of all teen pregnancies result in the birth of a child. Although the girls’ parents may initially react with anger, they usually come to accept the situation and provide practical, if not financial, support. Motherhood means that the girl may now legitimately leave school and receive her own welfare check (although in the case of minors it may be paid through her mother). The young couple may marry but more often they do not; in Puerto Rico there is a long tradition of consensual unions (Fitzpatrick, 1971). Although the teenage father takes pride in this public demonstration of his manhood, his commitment to the mother and child is often temporary. Consequently, many teenage mothers face a future on public assistance in which men come and go, offering varying degrees of support or exploitation. As Horowitz (1983) points out, the Hispanic girl is likely to be deeply concerned about her identity as a good mother. To avoid any imputation of irresponsibility as a mother, she must make every effort to demonstrate her dedication to the welfare of her child. A good deal of gossip among gang members centered on girls who failed to take adequate care of their children. Motherhood did not require abandonment of the gang, but it did entail making satisfactory arrangements for the child. Girls who brought their children with them to the corner to hang out were considered irresponsible (also see Horowitz, 1983:128). The appropriate course of action was to leave the child with the grandmother for the night. After an all-night party, the girls would conscientiously return home in the early hours to get their children ready for school. Child care revolved very heavily around physical appearance, and the children’s clothes were washed and ironed carefully. Especially with daughters, considerable sums were spent on “cute” dresses and on straightening or perming their hair. Keeping their children in school and off the streets preoccupied the gang members, and much shame was attached to having a child in a “special class.” Any failure on the child’s part that might be traced back to inadequate motherhood was strongly condemned.

**Passivity**

Even as they extolled the importance of being a good mother, the girls opposed any view of themselves as being at the mercy of men. They took pride in their autonomy and rejected any suggestion that they could be duped or conned by males, especially in the area of having children. For many of the boys, parenthood symbolized the couple’s commitment to one another, and the males would often express their desire to father a child as evidence of their warm regard for the girl. After their first or second child, the girls objected, realizing that ultimately they would be left “holding the baby”:

> In Puerto Rico those ladies, boy, they have to suffer a lot. Those men, they play you dirty. All having a bunch of kids. All dirty and shit. And you see a man like that, why you going to keep having kids? For the same fucking man? Having four, six, seven kids like women do in Puerto Rico? I say “Uh-uh, that’s not me.” I do me an abortion. And like I tell you, I do four abortions already.

Abortion was a problematic issue for most of the girls. Wholehearted support might be construed as callous disregard for human life and place them in jeopardy of being seen as “bad mothers.” On the other hand, too many children could lead to a male-dependent lifestyle and suggest that they were vulnerable to being “conned” by men. Consequently, abortion was accepted as legitimate after the first or second child but was generally condemned in a first pregnancy. Adding fuel to their justification for abortion was the strongly condemnatory

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stance taken toward it in Puerto Rico; having an abortion was also an acceptance of being a modern American woman.

**Whores**

Because of the local public perception of the “loose” sexual morality of female gang members, the girls were faced with particular problems of self presentation in this sphere. The cultural context of Hispanic life places considerable emphasis upon the purity of young women before marriage although sex in the context of an exclusive love relationship is acceptable (Acosto-Belen and Christenson 1979; Pescatello, 1973). In the gang, serial monogamy was the norm and sexual promiscuity was frowned upon. One of the most frequent disparagements of rival gang members was that they were “nothing but a bunch of ho’s” (whores).5 This epithet was one about which the girls were very sensitive:

People say I’m a whore? They got to prove that. They can’t say “You’re a whore” just like that. They got to prove a lot of things. They ain’t got no proof, so what’s up? Right. So I say I don’t live with the people no more. I live by myself. What the people say, I don’t care. You know. Let it go.

Although it was in no way a requirement of membership, attachment to the gang often resulted in the girl becoming sexually involved with one of the male members. Once an exclusive romantic relationship had been established, the male would feel free to exert control over her public behavior and demeanor. At parties, for example, girls would sometimes get “high” and flirt mildly with other boys. This behavior usually provoked severe disapproval from their partners. During the summer, the boys would not allow their girlfriends to wear shorts or low cut T-shirts on the street. The girls chafed against these kinds of restrictions since they believed that flirting and fashion did not betoken promiscuity; however, they did accept the general premise that sexually suggestive behavior was inappropriate. Controls which males exerted in their role as boyfriends would certainly have been rejected by the girls had the males tried to impose them as a gang on the female affiliate.

The girls also exerted a good deal of social control over one another’s sexual behavior. New girls in the group who, unaware of the prevailing norms, slept around with a variety of men were called to account for their behavior at meetings and instructed that serial monogamy was required. While this was in part motivated by the girls’ own self interest in protecting their exclusive relationship with their boyfriends, members also referred to the danger of losing male respect by this kind of unselective sexuality:

We think that she’s a whore? She’s a tramp? We just call her and we tell her “You got to get down with that one. But don’t let everyone go to you. You’re going to play with that one? Play with one, but the other ones, they’re like friends.” They [the boys] used to talk about her. We used to tell her, “Look, they talk about you—this and that. You think you’re doing it right, but you doing it wrong. Because they’re talking about you like a dog.” She cool out in the end.

**Marianismo**

In their effort to avoid the stigma of cheapness through serial monogamy, the girls ran the risk of becoming overdependent on men. The term marianismo describes the qualities of femininity which are reciprocal to those of machismo in men. It refers to the cult of the Virgin Mary. A good woman accepts the dominance of men, values her own compliance and nurturance, and consistently places the needs of her family, especially her husband, above

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5. None of the girls I spoke with admitted to prostitution in their past. Where money was accepted from men after a date, it was treated as an unanticipated act of generosity. For example, one girl occasionally met men outside a Manhattan swingers club and went in with them. This lowered the men’s admission price. The money they gave her at the end of the evening was considered a gift.
her own (Pescatello, 1973). Gang girls, socialized in the United States, strongly rejected this subordinate view of female life. Most girls had seen their mother tolerate, for various periods of time, the blatant abuse and infidelity of their fathers. They frequently expressed disgust that their mothers had remained in the situation:

Yeah—Puerto Rican women they hurt a lot. Some women they hurt a lot. They suffer a lot because of the man. Or because of their kids. I don’t know. Like my mother—I say “Mommy, why don’t you leave Poppy?” “Ah, because I love him at the time and I don’t want you to have a stepfather.” I used to tell her, “Oh man, sometimes you’re stupid.”

The right of the Puerto Rican male to exercise physical control in his own house has been noted frequently, and the girls’ history of physical abuse from their fathers and stepfathers made them unwilling to tolerate similar beatings from their own partners. After violent domestic confrontations, when they saw their boyfriend repeating the same cycle of abuse that their mothers had accepted, they often made exaggerated efforts to assert their own independence:

I said, “Don’t think because I have kids I’m going to put up. I’m not.” Like some women will put up, I won’t. I’ll leave him. I don’t have to put up with him. I’ll find somebody else that will give me more. I try not to aggravate him so what I do is I worry him a lot. I’ll leave him even if it takes killing myself to do it. If I have to escape and that’s the only way because he’s watching, because he doesn’t want me to get away, I’ll do it. I’ll kill myself.

Infidelity on the part of the male represented an ever present threat to the stability of their social arrangements. Puerto Rican culture emphasizes male autonomy in many spheres including that of extra-marital affairs (Acostto-Belen and Christenson, 1979; Pescatello, 1973). Although the males’ traditional role as breadwinners and the exclusive rights it gave them have eroded, the double standard of sexual morality continues to exist in many New York communities. Puerto Rican women regard men with both fear and condescension as violent, sexual, free, and childish. Men’s immaturity and irresponsibility are part of their nature for which they cannot be held fully accountable. Non-gang girls in the neighborhood were often attracted by the boys’ outlaw image. The boys felt that to refuse an offer of sex was tantamount to admitting homosexuality and argued that if a girl “put it in his face” they had no choice but to go along. The girls accepted this rogue male image and so had to exert their own control over rival girls. They did this vigorously as if to underline their unwillingness to repeat the marianismo of their mother:

We’ll still find out. We’ll always find out. They’ll swear on their mother, their father, their sister, their brother “I didn’t do it. I didn’t do it with that bitch. I wouldn’t make good with that bitch.” They try to soup. But I already know the deal with them. “Alright, yeah, yeah, yeah.” And that’s when I go. Then I go up to the girl. And they don’t even bother hitting us ‘cos they know they’re gonna get worse. I would just go up. “Hey, I hear you made it with my old man.” This and that. And blat, that’s it. The whole thing is over ‘cos they don’t even raise their hands. They put their head down and they cut out fast.

In this way many romantic disputes involving couples were actually resolved between the young women. The necessity of being attached to a male in order to have sexual relations, combined with a reluctance to challenge the boy directly over his infidelity, had a very divisive effect upon the girls’ relationships with one another. As Horowitz (1983) also notes, disputes over men constituted a major source of aggression among the girls.

However, gang girls do take pride in their ability to fight. In rejecting passivity, they stress their aggressiveness and work hard at developing a reputation as a fighter:

Girls around here they see a girl that’s quiet. they think that she’s a little dud. Yeah—let’s put it that way. They think they don’t know how to fight. . . . Round here you have to know how to fight. I’m glad I got a reputation. That way nobody will start with me—they know, you know. They’re going
to come out losing. Like all of us, we got a reputation. We're crazy. Nobody wants to fight us for that reason—you know. They say "No, man. That girl might stab me or cut my face or something like that."

Among the Chicana girls studied by Horowitz (1983), aggression was only acceptable when it was directed against other females. Even here, it was seen by the community as an untypical behavior flying in the face of the self control that was expected of young women. However, Quicker's (1984) description of Chicana gang members in Los Angeles reveals strong similarities with the girls in Puerto Rican gangs. Although aggression was most often directed at females, either "squares" or members of rival gangs, the girls I studied took particular pride in recounting episodes in which they had fought with male gang members from neighboring groups. Hispanic gang boys express considerable ambivalence about the girls' aggression. On one hand they are proud of the girls' "heart," while at the same time they will often intervene in a female fight to prevent injury to the girls (also see Horowitz, 1983). Whatever the boys' attitude, the Puerto Rican girls clearly took pride in their willingness to fight and saw it as an indication of their commitment to the gang, to their relationships, and to their self-respect. More than winning a fight, it was important to be ready to enter one. Before a fight they prepared by tightly securing their hair with oil (so that opponents could not grab it) and donning boots and jeans. Rival gang members were disparaged as hanging out with their men only when times were good and failing to support them during gang wars:

Tramps. All they think about is screwing. It's true. It's true, shit. They don't fight. They don't go to rumbles with their guys. Nothing. They're punks. They're a bunch of punks. Cuiso, right? The Cheeseburgers are a bunch of punks? They're not tough. They're a bunch of dope fiends.

The importance of not "ranking out" or backing down from a fight was frequently stressed. It was seen as indicative of moral weakness. Fighting was sufficiently highly valued that the initiation of new "prospects" required them to demonstrate their fearlessness in the face of physical attack.

Well when we started it was like initiating people—when you take them to the park, like, to see. Like there's some girls that join, like "I get in trouble, I got backup." Now for us this wasn't that. We used to take a new girl to the park. Now that girl had to pick one of our girls, and whoever she wanted, she had to fight that girl to see if she could take the punches. Now if she couldn't, she wouldn't fight. Then we wouldn't take her. Because then we know that someday—you know, somewhere in the streets—she's going to wind up getting hurt. So we knew that she could fight her battles and we used to let her join. She had to fight first. Without crying.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

Previous work on female gang members has placed considerable emphasis upon their sexuality either as an area for reform through social work, as a symptom of their rejection of middle-class values, or as the single most important impression management problem which they face. While any examination of self concept clearly must include attention to the management of appropriate male or female identity, I believe it is a disservice to girls in gangs not to recognize other salient features of their self definition. These young women are stigmatized by ethnicity and poverty as well as gender.

By virtue of their marginal position, both economically and socially, they live their lives within a bounded geographical area where the major sources of influence and support are likely to be families, friends, and neighbors. Without the opportunity to fulfill themselves in mainstream jobs beyond the ghetto, their sense of self must be won from others in the immediate environment. Within this context, gang girls see themselves as different from their peers. Their association with the gang is a public proclamation of their rejection of the lifes-
tyle which the community expects from them. Sociological portraits that deny the girls' sense of differentness from other neighborhood youth deny the validity of the way the girls see themselves.

The sense of differentness experienced by the girls is fragmented and diffuse—as indeed it must be since they do not fully embrace an oppositional deviant identity. They do not buy into a countercultural role that is well-articulated and wholly coherent. Rather they reject bits and pieces of the conventional lifestyle that is expected of them in the local community. Inevitably, the girl finds herself in a contradictory and vulnerable position as she attempts to retain her integrity within her shifting self definition. She is Puerto Rican but neither provincial nor unAmerican. She may be poor but her life is neither drab nor criminal. She enjoys her femininity but rejects passivity and suffering.

My evidence suggests that much can be learned from examining how we vilify the traits and actions of others. Much of our social life is spent in talk, and a significant portion of it is concerned not with our own behavior but with that of others. The terms of condemnation in gossip reveal a good deal about our own preoccupations and values. When we criticize others' behavior we assure the listener and ourselves that we are exempt from similar accusations—we set ourselves apart from the object of our derision. Sometimes we level our criticism at figures beyond our acquaintance such as media personalities or politicians; but the most salient reference point for our self definition are those individuals or groups whose social niche we share. This is particularly true for disadvantaged groups who are caught in a restricted social environment with little hope of mobility.

Important questions remain to be answered about the present approach, as about other sociological analyses of accounts. The chronology of gang membership and self definition by rejection remains uncertain. Do gangs act as clearing houses for those who have already felt their distance from "straight" lifestyles, or does gang membership encourage and articulate this kind of self definition? What changes occur in the evaluation of previously rejected qualities when the girl falls away from the gang? Answers to these questions will only be found if researchers continue to take disparaging social talk as a legitimate focus of enquiry. Closer examination of the vilification of others may indicate that gossip is a strategic resource for the development of a sense of selfhood.

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