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Labeling and Deviance: Fraternities and Gangs

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Gangs: Society and The Labeling Theory

There is a dichotomy that exists in today's society between the privileged and the

poor. Those who are wealthy seem to be able to commit violations and avoid punishment

for it, while the poor bear the brunt of law enforcement. When you hear the word gang,

what do you think of? Most likely, you do not think of a group of college students who

belong to a fraternity. You think of a group of hoodlums who tote guns, sell drugs, and

ruin neighborhoods. This is why it is necessary to understand the labels that society

places on certain people and the effects that it has on behavior.

Why are some people labeled as deviants? Who makes the labels? The Labeling

Theory asks two questions: what is defined as deviance? and what is defined as a

deviant? Different behaviors mean different things in certain areas, which makes

deviance very difficult to define. Research has tried to discover the reasons behind

certain societal norms and labeling of certain people. Sociologists have studied the

growth of social labels that are used to define norm violations or violators. This involves

how these violators are socially treated. Defining a deviant is a process where categories

for describing norm violations and violators are applied to specific situations. Some

individuals manage to commit violations, yet escape labeling.

Lemert views deviance as a social label by describing that different groups

compete for power and only certain groups' norms become the norms that are accepted

by society. Some people are then defined as norm violators according to these rules set

by the "winning" group's new societal norms. Primary deviance is deviance that does not affect the psychological structure and social roles of a person. Secondary deviance is deviance that is a response to problems or conditions caused by a societal reaction to primary deviance. Therein, secondary deviance is caused or is a result or reaction to primary deviance. Lemert's theory supports the idea that primary deviance plus additional factors led to a societal reaction. This then causes secondary deviance. (Liska, 1987)

Deviance was also viewed as a social status. *"…deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of the rules and sanctions to an 'offender.' The deviant is one to whom that label has successfully been applied; deviant behavior is behavior that people so label"* (Becker, 1963) In studying social status, Becker has used the terms "master status" and "career." Master status is a status that overrides all other statuses in relation to interaction, such as race. Career is status that occur in an orderly sequence, such as a job career.

A person's public labeling as a deviant greatly affects opportunity for jobs or acceptance. Although two people may have different master statuses, their deviant behavior may cause them to be treated similarly, socially speaking. It may also cause them to be treated differently because of their master statuses. Becker's main idea through his studies was that through the labeling processes, society makes way for more systemic norm violators.

Sociologist Edwin M. Schur viewed deviance as a self-concept. He felt that a person is not labeled as a deviant because of what they did or who they are. Some people are stigmatized while other evade such labeling. (Liska, 1987))

The Labeling Theory seeks to understand why some people are labeled and others are unfairly grouped. Why are some people labeled as gang members and others are excused for illegal activity. It would appear to be a racial, social, and economic distinction that separates and excuses the activities of a fraternity, while criminalizing social deviants or more commonly known as "gang members." Gangs always have a negative connotation associated with it, yet it can refer to any group of people who have a common interest. The Labeling Theory suggests that those deviants labeled as such begin to view themselves as deviants, even if they were not originally a deviant. Some individuals are even considered guilty by association. And so, future deviants are manufactured through society's labeling. Self-concept and self-esteem is greatly affected and lowered by the labels that society places on these individuals. (Liska, 1987)

William Chambliss' essay, *The Saints and the Roughnecks*, explores the effects of class on deviance. The Saints were a group of eight upper-middle class boys, and the Roughnecks were six lower-class boys. The Saints often participated in illegal activities such as vandalism, theft, and drinking, but were not arrested. The Roughnecks participated in the same activities, however, they were always in trouble with the police. This comparison is similar to the fraternities and the street gang dichotomy. The Saints were able to get away with their activities because they had status in society, and the Roughnecks did not. They were aggravated with the system and the way they were treated by the police, while the Saints knew how to manipulate authority to their advantage. There was a bias that existed that is similar to the one that exists today between street gangs and fraternities. Even though two groups commit the same crimes, those who don't have status are criminalized. Society makes these labels and chooses

who has status and who does not—this also decides who gets away with crimes, and who gets targeted. These labels greatly affected the way the Roughnecks performed in their lives. The labeling only caused future violence and made the boys believe that they couldn't better themselves. The Saints were able to go to college and become successful because society condoned their behavior and gave them status. This is what occurs in today's society, where one group is chosen to be praised (as a Saint) and the other is defined as a criminal (a Roughneck). It may seem like an innocent definition, however, it has been shown through studies such as Chamliss' that these labels greatly affect the concept society has on each group and the concept the members have about themselves. (Chambliss, 1973)

What is a Gang?

A group of criminals that are up to no good? A fraternity brotherhood? What exactly defines a gang? Historically, gangs have been categorized as a group of hoodlums that terrorize communities, deal drugs, carry weapons, and ruin the very fabrics of society. The history of gangs dates back for centuries. The term "thug," which is often associated with gang members, dates back to 13th century AD in India. This term was used to describe a group of criminals who pillaged towns. They had their own hand signs, rituals, symbols, and slang, much like the today's gang. In the 1800s, outlaws such as Billy the Kid and The James Gang reigned in the Wild West. In the late 1800s in New York, groups of immigrants moving into America formed gangs in the famous downtown Manhattan Five Points area. One such gang, The Five Points gang named for the area, was one of the most infamous and dangerous gangs in history. The Five Points Gang had

such famous members as Al Capone, Lucky Luciano, among others. This gang mentality became more and more popular in the 1920s and 30s in inner city neighborhoods and ethnic ghettos. These gangs were mostly comprised of African Americans, Hispanics, and Asians. From the 1960s on, we have seen the popularity and presence of gangs increase and become more and more apparent in neighborhoods.

(http://www.gripe4rkids.org/his.html)

Currently, there is no standardized definition for gangs, because law enforcement and sociologists argue over what defines a gang. This term is used by law enforcement to refer to street gangs, because it includes both juveniles and adults. A gang is a group of people, whose purpose is to commit criminal acts, have special signals, symbols, and names. "*A street gang is group of people that form an allegiance based on various social needs and engage in acts injurious to public health and safety. Members of street gangs engage in (or have engaged in) gang-focused criminal activity either individually or collectively, they create an atmosphere of fear and intimidation within the community.*"

(http://www.hi-ho.ne.jp/taku77/refer/gang.htm) Oddly enough, couldn't the legal definition of a gang be used to relate to a fraternity as well? Fraternities are a group of people who get together, form an alliance, and participate in illegal activities that are detrimental to a community. In today's society, however, the criminal actions of fraternity brothers are excused because of labeling and status. Fraternities have similar characteristics to gangs, such as identifiable names, colors, symbols and signals, however, they are protected under an " academic brotherhood" guise.

The term gang can easily apply to any group of people with similar interests, and so why does this definition only apply to street gangs? Unfortunately, most often, we find street gangs as criminal enterprises, participating in violent and illegal activities. Street gangs are an attempt to serve the needs of a community and offer an escape from the hardships of poor neighborhoods, however, this "escape" usually involves violent and illegal activities. Fraternities may take part in illegal activities, but they are also very well-known for their community service work, and serving as a resource for career opportunities for members. Belonging to these fraternities offers members status in society and a connection to opportunities throughout the country. Fraternity members are admired and respected, while members of street gangs are not, because they are *almost* solely criminal. While fraternities do have extremely negative aspects, they do also serve their members and their community, giving them the status and respect they need to succeed.

Theorists and researchers alike have studied and argued over what exactly defines a gang. The Chicago School, also known as the Ecological School evolved in the 1920s and 30s, were in essence urban sociologists, studying the urban environment and how it affected its inhabitants. It mainly focused on human behavior as it is determined by social structures and physical environmental factors, rather than genetic and personal characteristics. (wikipedia.org) The Chicago School is well-known for its work on Subculture Theories. Theorists such as Thrasher and Sutherland applied the principles of ecology and developed the Social Disorganization Theory *"…which refers to consequences of the failure of social institutions or social organisations including the family, schools, church, political institutions, policing, business, etc. in identified*

communities and/or neighbourhoods, or in society at large and social relationships that traditionally encourage co-operation between people." (wikipedia.org) Society has failed the youth and they turn towards another group for support and protection. The problem lies with the social institutions, and not the individual. *"To claim that an actor in the community is "deviant" may be valid from the point of view that his or her action flouts social codes or laws, but it fails to capture both the very real inequity that may exist among the communities as well as the numerous nondelinquent aspects of the activity."* (Konton, Brotherton, & Barrios, 6)

In "The Gangs," Frederick Thrasher explored gangs from a sociological perspective. Thrasher was considered the father of gang research and was a member of the Chicago School. *"Society has sometimes been conceived to be an innate trait of individual man."* Thrasher compared gangs to "play groups" in a playgropund. He explained that those who join gangs want to have a sense of belonging in these group. Gangs are largely adolescent and are a way for youth to have a sense of belonging. Gangs exist, Thrasher feels, because they offer a substitute where society has failed. It fills a gap, and is an escape from the poor, overcrowded neighborhoods they live in. Gangs are a production of disorganized conditions. (Thrasher, 1927)

Phillippe Bourgois explores the inner-workings of gangs, the reasons why people join and what they do to support themselves. Gangs are often found in poverty-stricken areas, and are prone to drug dealing trades. Gang members are attracted to the drug trade as a means to make good money fast, and can then support their families. Also, the drug trade is extremely lucrative, and the members make more money than they would at a

legal job (there is potential to make 10 times minimum wage). Many of these members have been working since they were young, but never made significant pay that could help their families. For these members, drug dealing is a side job, and is referred to as an "underground economy." From their experiences, members have had "legal," corporate jobs, but they were prejudiced, and made "legal" experiences unhappy ones. They were made to feel stupid, inferior, and unimportant at these jobs—humiliated, degraded, and embarrassed as if they were second-class citizens. (Bourgeois, 1996)

Theorists have attempted to understand the inner-workings of gangs for hundreds of years. One such theory is the Social Disorganization Theory, which attributes crime to the absence or breakdown of communal institutions such as family or school and the relationships forged by these institutions. These relationships are indicative of the "organized society" and the sense of community bonds in a specific geographic area. (Jensen, 2003) *"Gangs were publicly manifested signs that communities were poorly organized—specifically, "socially disorganized beyond the capacities of their local institutions of control and integration."* (Kontos, Brotherton, & Barrios, 3)

Gang members typically have low socio-economic status and live in urban, inner city neighborhoods. They are economically disadvantaged and turn to gangs for support and quick money. Youth are usually targeted as recruits. *"Why is criminology limited for an understanding of gangs? Are not urban gangs criminal entities by most legal definitions? Although many social groups may adhere to legal and scholarly definitions of "gang," the process by which appellations become attached is neither value free nor politically neutral.*" (Kontos, Brotherton, & Barrios, 4)

The Fraternity: A Male Delinquent Subculture?

One may think of fraternities and picture crazy parties, featuring kegs, athletes, interested girls, and music. What many do not acknowledge is the negative aspects of these all-male fraternities. Women are seen as objects of sexual desire, a goal to be achieved by throwing these parties or merely being associated with a brotherhood. Peggy Reeves Sanday comments on the type of environment fraternities portray to the female students. Experiences with fraternity members cannot only be degrading but also frightening for women students. A woman may enter the house and find herself getting a thumbs-up or a thumbs-down from the boys, who are judging her sexual suitability. (Sanday, 28) Girls are objectified even in the advertisements for the parties themselves. The ads are offensive, and show scantily clad women in sexually suggestive situations. For most fraternity parties, women get in free, and the implication is that they pay for their alcohol with sex. The mood of these parties is extremely sexually charged and centers around a theme. (Sanday, 29) These parties are not a means to make new friends and have good, clean fun. The men at these parties are looking for girls who "like to have a good time," and are interested in having sex with them—no strings attached. These brothers look at this as "scoring," "getting an easy lay," or "screwing around." If a brother does "score," he takes the girl upstairs to fool around. Women have reported that in some houses, the brothers leave the blinds open so others can see, and the doors are left unlocked. (Sanday, 29) The brothers are not looking for relationships or making conversation. They view the women as sexual objects, to be used or abused, and then degraded the next day in stories. *"In these settings, they avoid commitment and feeling for their sexual partners by choosing "sleazy women" from other schools, whom they*

need not face on campus the next day. They dominate these women by denigrating them for being willing to have sex…Party sex is the glue that binds the brothers to the fraternity body." (Sanday, 37)

Whether women see the loud row of fraternities as places for great parties, or as many do, a gauntlet of prying eyes that they must walk through, all students will sooner or later be affected by an atmosphere that ostensibly displays white, male, middle-class privilege. (Sanday, 28)

Another issue that is affiliated with fraternities, but is not spoken of because of their class and privilege is rape. Brothers do not view their sexual desires as a negative aspect, and degrade the women to excuse their behavior. The fault is placed on the women, portraying them as sexually promiscuous, and "asking for it" because they accepted drinks from the brothers and flirted with them. Sanday states, *"That is what 'asking for it' means: consent is given by the very act of coming to the party and getting drunk."* (Sanday, 56)

By coming to these parties, girls are putting themselves at risk for rape and unwanted advances simply by attending a party. While at these parties, the girls are exposed to advances by brothers as well as a plethora of alcohol. In some fraternities, brothers take part in a "circle dance" where the men strip naked, dance around quickly and then jump on top of each other into a pile, one brother bearing the brunt of the weight. (Sanday, 55) Ritual scapegoating occurs in both the circle dance and in the sexual conquests of women. In the circle dance, one brother has to bear the weight of the other brothers, and in gang rape, one woman bears the heat of a group's sexual

aggression. *"…the brothers' practice of affirming their heterosexual identity by taking women as sexual objects while rejecting women as equal gives their house activities a marked misogynist quality."* (Sanday) The brother's actions fair similar to those of a street gang. They do what they want, and take no responsibility for their actions, however fraternities rarely face prosecution for their actions. Their privilege and status in society is a way for them to escape blame, while street gang members are easy targets for law enforcement.

The Female Facet

It is not very often that we hear that there is a new, extremely dangerous all-female gang terrorizing neighborhoods. Female gangs have grown in popularity over the years, however, they are mostly associated with a male counterpart. Female gang members were described as "tomboys" or sex objects who where for the use of the male gang members. Their function was to serve the male members as girlfriends, sexual objects, weapon or drug carriers, and as spies. (Kontos, Brotherton, Barrios, 2003) The gangs represent a refuge for young girls who have a variety of hardships to face in their lives, whether it be sexual abuse, their own children, poverty, and family issues. The gangs offer a life where they are supported, cared for, and above all, protected. Five problems that young women face that would make a life in a gang look attractive to them are: working for the rest of their lives without much education, being abused by their man, responsibility for children, social isolation in the house, and being powerless in low-class. (Kontos, Brotherton, Barrios, 2003) Another reason for the increased membership

and interest of women are *"…females' increasing liberation—essentially, that such shifts are a result of urban females demanding and achieving equal involvement and status in the traditionally 'masculine' arenas of urban gangs, drug markets, and violence."* (Kontos, Brotherton, Barrios, 2003) In recent years, a push for liberation from the aforementioned hardships have interested poverty-stricken women to act out and affiliate themselves with more masculine activities. Along with this push has come an increasing amount of violence.

For female members, looking back, their experiences had both positive and negative consequences. Members feel as though the gangs gave them what they needed at the time, which was economic and emotional support, however they admit they would not want their family members to join a gang. Former members speak about the positive self-esteem, strength, and stability through their gang involvement. They needed the gang in order to survive their economic, social, emotional or situational problems they were having at the time. Many of these women suffered from abuse from their boyfriends, or family members, and the gang offered a haven for them to get away and empower themselves. The gang gave them what they needed, but not without the constant stealing, violence, and drugs that surrounded them. Former members explain that they wish they could have had the positive empowering aspect of the gang without the negative violent aspects. (Kontos, Brotherton, Barrios, 2003)

<u>Misogyny</u>

Both fraternities and street gangs have an extremely misogynistic basis. They both participate in rape, and do not view it as such. Women are blamed for what happens

to them by fraternity brothers because they accepted the drinks and advances of the brothers. Women are not respected or revered—they are degraded, harassed, and taken advantage of. Rape is not uncommon in street gangs either. Street gang members force rape upon females willing to join their gang. In order to be initiated into the gang, the girls must have sex with some or all of the members of the gang. In Makes Me Wanna Holler, Nathan McCall explains how his group of friends took advantage of young girls in their neighborhood. What is most disturbing about the chapter *Trains* is the length at which these young men went in order to take advantage of a young girl. Trains occur when a group rapes a young girl one after the other. In McCall's neighborhood, this was a weekly occurrence. The girls were "kidnapped" or lured into homes by the boys, and were held down and raped. If the girls refused, the boys would scare them into conceding. They boys took turns raping the girl and watching each other and cheering each other on. These young girls of 12 and 13 were raped viciously and by multiple people in their own homes. This is what occurs in street gangs, because women are considered second-class to the male members. McCall did not see his actions as rape—but he knew what he was doing was wrong. (McCall, 1994)

Fraternities and street gangs have many similar characteristics, however, brothers' actions are excused because of their status. The criminal activity that fraternities take part in are considered part of the "boys will be boys" excuse. Members of street gangs are targeted because they are labeled and are of the lower class. Their wealthier counterparts are excused from their criminal actions. *"In legal cases, judges and prosecutors have overlooked fraternal misconduct as youthful aberrations, and such groups have been absolved from possible qualification as collective actors intent on*

promoting criminal activity." (Kontos, Brotherton, & Barrios, 4) These excuses only formulate more systematic violence and criminal activity because the brothers know that they can escape the consequences because of their status in society, thus continuing the belief that privilege can excuse any action.

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