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GANG RELATIONSHIPS IN A BLACK TOWNSHIP IN SOUTH AFRICA

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AFRICAN PEACEBUILDING NETWORK
APN WORKING PAPERS: NO. 25

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FEBRUARY 2020

Abstract: This paper examines the ways in which young men involved in gang violence forge and sustain their relationships over time in Gugulethu, a township in Cape Town, South Africa. We argue that even though gang members employ violent techniques to sustain their relationships, such relationships are also alternative sources of social and emotional support especially in a context characterized by extreme poverty and fractured families, as well as communities having to deal with great financial hardship. These relationships tend to extend beyond gangs to include community leaders and close family members. The paper draws from an ethnography of walking the township streets, being in them, observing and engaging in conversations with young men involved in gang violence. We used thematic analysis to achieve a detailed understanding of the data, using the voices of the participants on which this study is based to recognize, draw out and analyze the themes.

Key words: Gangs, crime, violence, identity, youth

Introduction

This paper focuses on the ways in which young men living in a township, where most of the people are Xhosa-speaking, become part of a gang and the ways in which the gang relationship is forged and sustained over time. The paper pays attention to the ways in which this relationship is understood by the young male gang members. We noted that the gang relationship is one forged through violence and sustained through loyalty to their leader who is referred to as the 'General'. However, despite the relationship between gang members and their 'Generals' being sustained through violence, gangs are also sources of social support and often fill a vacuum left by the absence or lack of involvement of some guardians and/or parents in the township. We argue that the continuous operations of gangs, and the relationships formed between members, either within or on the periphery of it, becomes an alternative social support system in township neighborhoods with high levels of violence and crime. In substantiating our argument, we draw from an ethnography of being in a place: greeting, talking, passing-by and interacting with young local men. We observed the streets, detailing everyday life in a setting where violence and crime was eminent. We therefore depended on different sources: spending time on the streets, talking to youngsters, reading the graffiti on the walls etc. This helped to provide a detailed understanding of what people involved in violence tended to be silent about.

Gang Violence Context

South Africa's history of colonialism, and subsequent apartheid policies and practices helped to give rise to the emergence of gang violence. Since the 1920s there have been documented records of gang violence in South Africa (Kynoch 1999). The situation was exacerbated during apartheid when 'non-white' marginalized communities were exposed to deep-rooted poverty and other risk factors which promoted youth gang violence (Altbeker, 2007).

Cooper & Ward (2012) accordingly observe that despite the demise of apartheid, young people in marginalized areas, especially townships, continue to resort to gang violence in order to survive. Thus, experiences of impoverishment, relative deprivation and socio-cultural disjuncture continue to frame the lives of many young people in these communities (Foster, 2012). This trend is confirmed by the Affordable Housing Data Centre (AHDC, 2017): it shows that, e.g. in greater Nyanga, an area which includes Gugulethu,

72.3% of the residents live below the Household Subsistence Level (HSL). Hargovan (2015) furthermore observes that young people continue to live in communities also marked by high rates of unemployment, substance abuse and weak social cohesion. These social and economic factors are sources sustaining youth gang violence (Swingler, 2014; Ncube and Madikizela-Madiya, 2014).

According to Standing (2005), gang violence is further fuelled by global social networks. Since 1994 some South African gangs have forged connections with global gang networks in relation to e.g. the drug trade and the illicit acquisition and sale of ivory, rhino horn etc. (Pinnock 2017). In view of the rise and complexity of corruption in South Africa, the continued presence and increase in gang-like formations can also be ascribed to a failure of the judicial and policing system - some of whom also became involved in illegal activities like fraud and bribery. Gangs have advanced their ability to survive and thrive through their links with law enforcement agencies. For Mama (2012) lack of policing and a loss of trust in the justice system contribute to the spate of gang violence in the Western Cape.

In our paper we focus on the practices of gang violence in Gugulethu: a black township established in 1960 as a result of overcrowding in the first black residential area of Langa, also in Cape Town. Initially barrack-like homes/hostels were built in Gugulethu, which were intended to be single quarters for male workers. The latter had to leave their families in the rural areas due to the apartheid era's influx control and migrant labor system, which only allowed the actual work force to come to the towns. Many of the people who live in Gugulethu migrated from elsewhere, most often the Eastern Cape - an area which is mainly dominated by Xhosa-speaking people (Patel 2012). Gugulethu comprises different sections: Europe, Barcelona, Kanana, Lusaka, New Rest, Gugulethu SP, Phola Park, Vukuzenzele, and Zondi. According to Brankovic (2012), violence in Gugulethu is structural, historical and present. It is institutionalized in inequalities of power, which in turn restrict life opportunities for individuals, especially the young people. The quest for a decent life seems to be influenced by the disparity between neighborhoods with the poor townships sitting alongside more affluent mainly white and coloured suburbs.¹

Accessing Gangs

Doing research in a context characterized by gang violence has its own

problems in terms of linking up with and talking to participants. This was compounded by our interest in understanding the ways in which gang relations are produced and sustained over time. Hence, our conversations and observations principally focused on young men (we did not meet young women) involved in gangs in some or other way. All were aged between 18 and 45. Only one of the participants was 58 years old. He, however, viewed himself as a young man. He has never married. He does not have a child. He adamantly considers himself as a young man. Interestingly he hangs out with those between the age of 18 and 45. We hang around the township, in the streets. In order to also interact with members or participants involved in criminal groupings who steal, rob and sometimes assault or kill, we first connected with a former combatant who served in the South Africa National Defence Force (SANDF), whom we will refer to as Sam. We had worked with Sam in a different project on violence in the townships. He was able to connect us with youth gangs as we moved around the township on field trips - especially in the streets. Sam introduced us to the community leader as "friends from the university." He was informed about our research and gave his consent. He opined: "what you are researching here, is the major problem we are facing in this community for many years, and the problem will continue." He offered to assist us if we needed it.

In walking around the streets, we could see that the space was reminiscent of violence. Broken bottles littered the tarred road. Sam explained that these were used by gang members when they clashed, especially at night. We were introduced to a one-armed former gangster by the ex-soldier. We were careful to not probe too deeply during this conversation, because it was apparent that the injury was the result of violence. This was confirmed by Sam who said he lost his arm in a gang shootout when he was fighting "there" (pointing to a street).

We were able to meet some gang leaders and subsequently accessed other members through them. Sam, who was our entry point, made this possible. Sometimes we accessed gang members through their mothers. For example, during a fieldwork visit, we wanted to talk to a gang member, but he referred us to his mother. She agreed to talk to us but stressed that we should not take her son to the neighboring street because it was in the territory of another gang, against which they were fighting. What was interesting to us was the ways in which mothers became aware of their children's gang activities and acted as defenders for them. Through conversations and interactions with young men in the streets we examined the ways in which

they became entangled in gang groups and how they sustained these relationships.

Becoming a Gang: Street Relations

On entering Gugulethu we noted young people were present on streets and the street corners. Initially we found it difficult to walk and approach these young people. We walked along the streets, very much interested in what these young people were doing and saying. Later, along with Sam we felt reassured and more confident in the streets, talking to the young people standing and moving along them. When we approached a group of five young men on the street corner, we greeted them. One of the group members responded: “we saw you when you were approaching this street, and we realized that you are walking with outsiders.” Sam told us that he was the leader of the gang which operated in that street. His name was Sifiso. We told Sifiso about our research and he said that because we were walking with a respected person from the community, i.e. Sam, we were welcome.

We observed that the young people on the streets were organized in what they did: some spoke on behalf of others and some were told what to do. In most instances, those who spoke on behalf of others were the ‘commanders’ of the gang. They gave ‘orders’ to ‘recruit’ gang members to do the mugging and bring back the money to those who spoke on their behalf on the street. Thus, those who speak on behalf of all the others viewed themselves and were referred to, as the ‘Generals’: who could give ‘commands’ and ‘orders’ to the ‘foot soldiers’ without being questioned.

To become a ‘General’ in the gang, one has to kill, know the tactics of robbery, and to have been imprisoned at some point. So in essence, promotion to the rank of a ‘General’ depicts a criminal journey, but also resembles how in some way young people perceive time: from foot soldier to being a ‘General’, who can order the ‘recruits’ (gang members) to mug people and bring the spoils to him. The spoils include money, which is sometimes used to buy drugs. The gang recruits are provided with drugs as a way to introduce them into gang activities. The youth quickly take these up as they seek to get accepted into a gang. Thus, taking drugs in a group, is a way of accepting the ‘unwritten rules’ of being part of a gang. In this regard, drugs are metaphors that represent power, status, and forms of social identity.

Despite the fact that these gang members were involved in mugging people,

they looked scruffy, with uncombed hair, and scarred faces and hands. We asked the 'General' how they use the money: the response was that, money from gang activities is 'bloody money'. What this meant, Sifiso responded, was "this is money which we get through killing, money we get by force, hence we spend it on entertainment." Thus, identities and even masculinities are made and sustained by, e.g. manslaughter. It is a way of being a man through the making and doing of violence. The young members see themselves as different from others, those who don't kill. However, the masculine identities are structured within these gang groups where the 'General' tends to be hyper-masculine, making and 'commanding' other young men do violence.

One participant named Mandlenkosi said that in Gugulethu, young people tend to revere the 'General' because he lived a better life and wore the latest sneakers, jeans, and t-shirts. In some way we argue that this is 'artificial' living in communities which are ravaged with poverty. Thus wearing 'sneakers' in townships forges particular relationships, it is a form of social capital in which other young men in gang groups view the 'General' as a role model. The young people emulate them. According to a member of the group:

I am learning from Him; He is the Master of this street. Even when you were coming from that side, he told us that you are a good target from the way you walk and talk to each other.

This 'learning' from the 'General' presents to us the ways in which these young people connect to each other and how their gang relationship is maintained in the streets. There is sharing of street knowledge, the skills, and tactics of seeing people from a distance and being able to detect if they are outsiders from the way they walk and talk to each other.

We questioned the 'General' on what sets him apart from other gang members:

They like that I survive police shootings and I successfully commit robberies. These guys (gang members) they come to my house and they sit around me and we smoke...

The excerpt reveals that becoming a gang leader, 'General', is achieved by what is locally seen as achievements, using the cunning, tactics, and skills of survival when committing crimes. Hence, knowing tactics which are in

themselves violent is a form of masculinity which is violent. Thus, a 'General' has social status, which is also a form of social capital, enabling them to get recognized by other gang members. This is evident when gang members sit around the 'General' at his home. The young people aspire to such a life and to being surrounded by subordinate males. According to Mfecane (2016), forms of masculinities are hierarchized: the dominant and the subordinate. The 'General' masculinities are dominant to those of the other gang group members.

Gangster recruitment is a well-organized practice. It is about familiarity and neighborliness. One of the gang leaders, named Koko, said he recruited young people in his street because he already knew them from childhood. Koko noted:

All my gang members are guys I played with when we were growing up, we went to the same school, we used to share our lunch, biscuits etc.

It showed that the sociality of a gang group is not only about the present - it has to do with the past which in some way is re-configured in the present. In some instances, gangs comprise people who become familiar once they are in the group. Koko noted:

If you want to become a leader of your own gang which you have control over, you bring together young people and bring drugs and share with them. They easily become loyal to you because they believe you have the experience that they need to also become successful gang members...

The idea of sharing promotes power, group identity, and sociality. The ability to share is an exercise of power and authority. Koko provides and decides who to share with, which in essence is how power is enacted. Where the majority of young people have grown up with absent fathers, sharing can also be understood as an alternative source of social support system. Lack of familial support promotes involvement in proto or fully-fledged gangs. Young people often have difficult familial relationships and suffer abuse by their guardians or parents (Mama 2015), so sharing drugs is an alternative social relationship for them.

For Pinnock (2017:286) gang groups:

...are substitute families. They're also sites of entertainment, a source of protection from the dangers of being alone. They are schools for street survival and, very often, make the beginnings of gang entanglement.

Inasmuch as gangster groupings are in themselves criminal, there are ways in which young men have become a 'family.' Thus, gangs denote at least three things: family, entertainment space, and learning space. The entertainment for gangs within the groups is characterised by sharing of humour and jokes, which make long days short and liveable. Gangs become forms and spaces of socialities. Combined, these are the issues which makes the young people in the streets, who they are and what they believe in.

A young gang member named Zenzo, noted ways in which a young man gets entangled in gang practices. A potential new member can be identified by the kind of life that he leads: if he is living a life that is considered decent as compared to other young men who are in gangs, they may become jealous of him and devise ways to make a thug of him. Zenzo noted:

Let's take for instance, me as a boss of this area, and you are just new in this area, I will ask myself why he is living a decent life and I am living a thug life, he goes to school and so on. With my gang we will tell him - that either you join us or you against us, if you are against us it's done, you are a permanent target. If you don't want to be a permanent target the only choice you have is to join us. If you refuse to join us, when you go to the shops, you will be targeted and when your mother come back from work with groceries, she will of course be robbed. Your father comes back from shebeen² he will be beaten up, you are the only son in that house, it becomes compulsory for you to join us.

The streets as spaces of violence create a conundrum: many young people join gangs in order to protect themselves and their families, who may otherwise become targets of attack. Or, another way of recruiting young men to a gang is for example when a gang member deliberately walks an unsuspecting young man through a rival gang's territory. This happens when young men living in the same streets want to clandestinely recruit others who seem to be resisting the gang culture. For Zanele, a gang member,

If I am in a gang and you are not, my gang can make me take you to another gang territory so when we get there we are chased and we run away back to our territory and the person I went with to that gang, will now be associated with our gang.

In such circumstances, the young man would have been recruited in the gang. When members of the other gang see him, they threaten him. Therefore, the recruit, for his own safety, sticks to the gang's area and the gang 'General' where he has protection. For young men, violence is unavoidable and is linked to their sense of self and belonging to particular groups: violence and doing it, makes them socially visible in the neighborhood.

Once the young man recruited to the gang and sticks around with other gang members, he can be beaten up to test his commitment, or can also be given a gun to kill. As noted by the 'General,' "we do this to increase trust, since the recruit now knows the gang, he needs to prove he can be trusted". Once the recruit has committed a crime, he has to evade the police and will rather stay part of the gang network for security.

It is much easier to become a gangster than to leave a gang because loyalty and commitment to the superior, the group and its perceived cause are more important than any individual member. As noted by a gang member, Mandla, "leaving gangsterism is hard because you would have created many enemies for you, because you don't take note of the person you are doing bad." Mandi, another gang member, emphasised: "I can't leave it, if I leave, I will die." This was explained further by Vuyo, a gang member, who noted that fellow gang members worry if a one attempts to leave, because they assume that he will sell them out to authorities. For Mandi, "it's easy to join but hard to quit." The worry for Vuyo was that 'friends will say you can't just leave us like that, because you were killing people with us. As such gang leaders vehemently dissuade any member trying to leave, sometimes making serious threats against the person's life and family members.

It is important therefore to note that lasting bonds are created by the conduct of violence. Acting out violence becomes a node through which members socially connect to each other. Killing creates dread for those who in later life want to leave, fears that continue to haunt them. The gang provides a safe haven to deal with their fears.

Gang Territoriality: Neighborhood Operations

Since gangs depend on mugging people in the townships, and stealing from people going to and coming from work, and even those visiting the townships, territoriality is integral to their operations. In Gugulethu gang names are one of the ways in which gangs claim territory, by inscribing their gang group names on the walls. In the streets which we walked, we observed that names like Tupac, the Americans, the Afghanistans, the Moroccans' etc., were inscribed on the walls, on the road, halls, shops and public buildings like the police station. There was also a list of bawdy graffiti scrawled on the walls which depicts the gangs smoking and drinking. The inscriptions are claims denoting control of territory. It is a metaphor of power over the space. Gang violence is not only inscribed on people's bodies, but on objects and in particular on the landscape. In this regard, gang violence is made visible through graffiti scrawled on the omnipresent "durawalls." For those entering the townships, the graffiti of violence depicts what gangs do in the township and the spaces they occupy. Graffiti which depicts gangs tells us about particular identities which are also masculine, inserting power not only on people, but power over the landscape. The reading of the landscape tells us two issues at least: that power is made visible through the graffiti, and power defines who the gangs are in a particular space. The graffiti covered durawalls are markers through which territories are defined.

In claiming the territory, there is a sense of belonging to a particular place. Gangs rarely move out of their defined territories and tend to attack any gang that intrudes their territory. However, seasoned gangs and gang 'Generals' tend to move beyond their own streets, to invade other streets. Invasion is not easy, as this is characterised by gun fighting and knife stabbing. In claiming and re-claiming territories, gangs lose their lives and communities suffer. Amandla, one of the gang members showed us the scars of knife and gun violence which were inflicted on his body during fights. "You see all this, this one is a knife, and this one is also knife, but this one is a gunshot." When he was pointing on the gunshot scar, he sounded boastful: the scar looked was his symbol of pride, a metaphor of being a man. There is a kind of what Decker and Van Winkle (1996) called 'neighborhood attachment' which is a feeling of belonging to a place which defines group identity especially among gangsters. However, attachment to a place is a source of gang power and violence.

Policing the Township

One of the critical questions is why the police are unable to combat gangsterism. The participants said that the police use violence to deal with violence, an approach which gangsters rejected. For the gangsters, a more community friendly approach was needed to deal with youth gangsters. We also questioned the community leader on ways the police can combat gang violence in the community in which they lived. Their emphasis was on police's inability to deal with gang violence in a more peaceful way. For Ndlozi, a community leader, "police should be trained to promote less violent means in handling gang violence":

Police should be a police service. In order to achieve this, I think all police should go on a social worker course, you know, something like that to understand that they are not there to inflict violence or use violence. Police must not come with the attitude that I am going to send you to prison- I am not here to fix Cape Town.

Most of the people said the police were berating them, saying the gangsters came mostly from the Eastern Cape. The extract reveals that there is tension between the community and the approaches employed by the police to deal with gang violence. Thus, Hanson (2013) states that 'hard' policing methods 'tend to alienate and brutalise the community, increases support for gangs by the community and causes the police to lose community support.' Despite the increase in police efforts to deal with gang violence, Wegner et al (2016) state that there has been limited success with such intervention mechanisms aimed at preventing or reducing gang violence.

Thus, suggestions from the community leader's crime prevention officers should instead, so it was argued, engage with communities in Gugulethu. For Mohedeen (2016) communities' social structures are important to understand violence in townships. In this way both the police and the community can find peaceful ways of dealing with youth gangsterism.

As noted by Nkandla, a community leader:

Remember police are deployed here and they leave. They don't live here forever, they are visitors. They don't know what really happens in this community. We live with the people, we know them, and they know us. We know the problem and the police are told the problem.

The extract reveals that the police are viewed, as 'visitors', whereas the community leaders are at the center of dealing with the gang violence problem. While we do not seek to over-romanticize the capacity of the local community leaders in dealing with the gang violence problem, we assert that the government can tap into the knowledge and capacities of the community leaders to help to address the problem. Thus, our reading of the community leaders' voices is that local community structures are in a much better position to help the government gain better understanding of the problem. The local community structures such as area and street committees know those involved in gang violence and are sometimes respected by gang members, hence they have the capacity to talk to, sit down with, and engage with the young people involved in gang violence.

The community leaders constitute different structures: area and street committees, which hold community meetings, especially on gang violence issues. On our fieldwork visits, one of the street committee leaders notes that:

I have the responsibility of mediating gang violence related problems in this street, but I also talk to other street committee leaders in other streets, and we all meet with the community leader to discuss the problems we face in this area, including gang violence...

The extract reveals to us that inasmuch as gang members do have relationships among themselves, they also have existing relationships with the community leaders: area and street committees. This indicate to us that gang relationships go beyond the gang group, hence intervention which includes the community will likely be an initiative from within.

However, apart from community leadership, it was also noted that mothers are important in ensuring that children refrain from gang violence. We spoke to one of the medical doctors who operates a surgery in Gugulethu. We asked him how he managed to operate in this community which is characterized by rampant gang violence:

I have two of my medical doctors who were killed just here [pointing on the opposite side of the road]. They used to operate that surgery. But I survive not because of the police, but I have spoken to the mothers of these gangsters, and in turn they don't touch me at all. I am a free man here. The community like what I do for them here, and I

like them too.

The extract reveals to us that there could be a strong social relationship between gangsters (especially leaders) and their mothers. So, we argue that if peace is to be achieved in townships which are ravaged by gang violence, intervention must target mothers as well.

Conclusion

This paper has revealed the ways in which gang relationships are forged and maintained over time, especially in impoverished communities. It has argued that even though gang relationships are sustained by violent mechanisms, they are also sources and alternative social and emotional support systems for gang members, who sometimes live in broken families. We have also argued that gang relationships go beyond the gang members to include the community leaders and close family members such as their mothers. Gang violence intervention thus has to go beyond targeting gang members but also include the larger community. While our paper focuses on a specific place to reveal the ways in which gangs relate to each other, it offers us insights on how gangs thrive on social and emotional relationships. The paper contributes to our understanding of gang violence as one which is sustained by social relationships and ways in which the police service is perceived by the communities as a fractured service, one which needs community support to achieve its policing goals.

Acknowledgement

The research for the project From Networks of Violence to Networks of Peace: Armed Youth Violence in five African countries on which this paper is based was funded by an African Peacebuilding Network Collaborative Working Group Research Grant with support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

We also want to thank the reviewers, whose comments have helped in strengthening our paper.

NOTES

1. These racially informed designations originated in apartheid legislation but has been kept by the South African government after 1993.
2. Place where alcohol is sold.

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