

Title: Urban Gangs

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Definition: Female membership in gangs provides women with opportunities for affiliation, protection, respect, and mate selection. Women's aggressive behavior within the gang is generally more indirect and less deadly than that of male gang members, typically directed at other females, and used as a means of mate guarding or derogation of one's rivals.

Introduction

Early research on urban gang activity focused primarily on male gang members, only mentioning female members to discuss their appearance or deficiencies as viewed by the male gang members. However, during the 1980's there was a greater emphasis placed on the motivations underlying women's involvement in gangs. This research suggests that women join gangs for affiliation, protection, respect, and the prospect of finding a mate (Campbell, 1991; Molider, 1996). Additionally, a primary focus has been placed on investigating the factors that predict females' engagement in violent behavior within the context of gangs. The research suggests that female-perpetrated gang violence is the result of mate guarding, intrasexual jealousy, defense of one's honor, or pressure exerted by male members (Campbell, 1991; Campbell, 1984). This entry provides an overview of research on female gang members and places the findings in an evolutionary context to help explain women's membership, roles, and aggressive behavior within gangs.

Female Gang Members

There are about 400 gangs in New York City alone with 8,000 to 40,000 members in total. Of those members, it is estimated that 10% are female, although some estimate that female members account for as high as 30% of members (Laidler & Hunt, 2001). The women who are members of these gangs range in age from fourteen to thirty. Many are married – often to male gang members – and have children (Campbell, 1991). Many of these women and girls have a lack of education and come from dangerous neighborhoods. Many also have or had an unstable, violent family life, most of which included divorces, remarriages, or girls whose parents were never married. These female gang members were usually members of a gang with both female and male members or in an all-female gang named after the male gang with which they are associated, such as “The Sandman” and “The Sandman Ladies.” There are very few all-female gangs that are not associated with an all-male gang. Before 1980, the female members of gangs were often viewed as playing unimportant or minor roles, however, more recently, their roles within gangs have been more clearly elucidated (Molidor, 1996).

Women’s Membership and Roles within Gangs

From an evolutionary perspective, women’s membership in gangs can be traced, distally, to mating motivations. Fundamental features of men and women’s reproductive physiology have differentially shaped men and women’s mating strategies (Trivers, 1972). Owing to females’ large obligatory investment in offspring (e.g., nine months of gestation and a long period of breast feeding), lifetime reproductive potential is substantially limited, particularly in comparison to the reproductive capacity of men, who are limited only in their ability to gain access to mating opportunities. As a result, females best optimize their reproductive fitness by selecting high-

quality mates, that is, mates who are both willing and able to invest resources into their shared offspring. Indeed, research has shown that women show a strong preference for men of high status who have high income or earning potential (Buss, 1989; Buss & Schmitt, 1993). In urban environments, women from impoverished backgrounds seeking high-status mates may be drawn to gangs as a means of gaining access to mates who have the ability to acquire high status and access to resources (even if obtained illegally). Partnering with such men may also offer women protection from violence (Snydera et al., 2011).

Descriptive research on women's involvement in gangs is consistent with the idea that it is women of low socioeconomic status who are drawn to gangs. Female gang members are more likely to grow up in poverty and to have been raised in a single-parent home where the mother is the primary caregiver for the family, and the father is absent (Laidler & Hunt, 2001). Additionally, many female gang members have backgrounds of physical or sexual abuse (Molider, 1996).

Research is also consistent with the idea that primary motivations for gang membership include the protection, resources, and mating opportunities it provides. Indeed, the "roles" that women play in gangs are often based on their relationships to the male gang members. Research has categorized female gang members as belonging either to the "Good Girls" or "Bad Girls" group. "Good Girls" have brighter prospects for their future. Although they are likely to engage in substance use with the gang, they do so with greater restraint (Campbell, 1991; Laidler & Hunt, 2001). The "Good Girls" category is further divided into "Independent Women" and "Good Wives." "Independent Women" are members whose membership is temporary, as most hope to

attend college and become financially independent. The “Good Wives” also have aspirations to leave the gang, however they display a strong financial dependence on their boyfriends/husbands within the gang, making it difficult to leave (Campbell, 1991).

On the other hand, the female members who fall into the “Bad Girls” group, view their membership as long-term, often because their options are limited. They tend to have poor money management, do not do well in school, and are at high risk for prostitution and drug addiction (Campbell, 1991). Similar to “Good Girls,” “Bad Girls” are also divided into two smaller groups: the “Sex Objects” and the “Tomboys.” The “Tomboys” generally join in on fights with other gangs and participate in illegal activities, which is atypical in comparison to most female gang members. The male members do not appreciate the willingness of the “Tomboys” to fight, and most male members only accept them through sex, as the “Tomboys” are generally promiscuous with the male members. However, the women in this group are also able to maintain strong friendships with other female gang members (Campbell, 1991), which contrasts sharply with the female relationships of the “Sex Objects.”

The women in the “Sex Objects” category are often sexually active with one or more male members of the gang. Sex provides the primary means of their acceptance by the men as most do not have friendships with male gang members outside of sex. Other female gang members distance themselves from these women through othering, gossiping, and judgment of their behavior (Laidler & Hunt, 2001). Promiscuous behavior may represent a threat to the other women’s ability to secure long-term investment from their male partners. When sex is freely available, there are few incentives for men to invest in long-term relationships. Women’s indirect

aggression may therefore function as a means of combatting the ease with which men can gain access to short-term mating opportunities (Vaillancourt, 2013). Indeed, there are strong norms among female members for ensuring that women dress and act like a respectable woman. Failure to do so results in a loss of esteem by their peers. Being “respectable” includes standing up for themselves, being independent, not engaging in casual sex often, and not letting themselves lose control when under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Female members are typically more judgmental about the respectability of other female members than are the male members and will even engage in fights to defend their respectability or honor (Laidler & Hunt, 2001).

Overall, women’s relationships with other female members are often exceptionally different than their relationships with the male members. Female relationships are often flimsy and short-lived. Female members in relationships are often very jealous of other women as they typically depend on their partner for financial support. Many female friendships end as a result of disputes over men (Benenson et al., 2013; Campbell, 1991). Women’s relationships with men may be more long-lasting, though not without their own problems. Although the male members are protective of the female members (Laidler & Hunt, 2001), the women are often physically and sexually abused by them. If a woman is impregnated by a male member, that member often abandons her (Arnocky, Ribout, Mirza, & Knack, 2014; Campbell, 1991; Campbell, 2002).

Induction of Female Members

There are many different methods of inducting new female members, depending on the gang. Some women are required to sleep with any gang member who wishes to have sex with her, often to prove that she is heterosexual. A similar type of induction includes the potential female

member being coerced into sex with multiple members at a time. Other women are expected to fight many current female members at a time. These potential members are not expected to win these fights, but to prove that they can hold their own in a fight. Other women have to fight one current member of the gang, usually one of the most accomplished fighters. Another way that these women are inducted is by “walking the line,” in which the inductee walks along a line of members who beat her severely. Other times, the potential members are expected to participate in a shooting or a robbery in order to implicate them in the crime and to prove their loyalty to the gang (Campbell, 1991; Molider, 1996). These induction methods are similar to hazing practices observed in other groups and which serve the function of fostering loyalty to the group (Aronson & Mills, 1959).

There are, however, less violent methods of induction, including women having been associated with the gang from young ages until they are established as gang members, marrying a current gang member, or even being allowed into the gang without any kind of induction or initiation (Campbell, 1991; Molider, 1996). It is also possible for gang members to leave the gang. There are two main ways to do so: actively or passively. Most members who actively leave the gang leave due to injuries obtained during a gang-related fight. Members who choose to leave the gang passively often do so by getting married or having children (Campbell, 1991).

Violence and Aggression

From an evolutionary perspective, women are expected to engage in less violent aggression than men (Archer, 2006; Campbell, 1999; Campbell, 2013). This is due to the large investment that women make in their offspring. Indeed, women are essential to the survival of their offspring in a

way that men are not (Sear & Mace, 2008). Additionally, there are fewer incentives for women to engage in violent competition. For men, competition with other men serves the function of increasing their mating opportunities, but given women's low reproductive ceiling, such incentives are much weaker. The reduced benefits, and heightened costs, of engaging in violence for women yield a much lower rate of physical violence among women (Archer, 2006).

However, women are still motivated to compete with potential mating rivals as a means of protecting an existing relationship from mate poachers, or to attract a potential mate through the derogation of rivals (Arnocky, Ribout, Mirza, & Knack, 2014; Benenson, 2013). To achieve such ends, women are more likely to use indirect forms of aggression (Campbell, 1999). This permits women to compete for the best mates without putting themselves directly in harm's way.

Although women in gangs are involved in more violence than women who are not members of gangs, they commit fewer violent acts than their male counterparts in the gang. Additionally, much of the violence is directed toward their female competitors. The female gang members are often pressured by male members to commit violent acts (Campbell, 1991; Campbell, 1984). Many of these women would describe the fights as fair, since weapons are often excluded. Instead, most fights include the women using their teeth, nails, or any other body part in order to win the fight, unlike most male fights that use more deadly means of aggression, such as guns (Campbell, 1991).

There are different roles that female gang members take part in when using violence. Most women who participate in fights are "Bad Girls." For example, "Tomboys" use fighting and violence in intergang fights, (Campbell, 1991; Molidor, 1996) while "Sex Objects" fight mostly

with other women over jealousies about male members. When women fight with females outside of their gang, they are mostly fighting with women who are not associated with any gang and the fight occurs without weapons. Another common type of fighting is called integrity fights which occur when a female gang member's honor has been called into question. These fights generally happen in public and are more likely to include weapons. However, overall, most intragang fights occur in private, do not typically have a victim, and generally conclude by both parties voluntarily walking away (Campbell, 1984).

Conclusion

Though women's involvement in gangs is less common than that of men, there is now sufficient documentation of women's membership in gangs to begin to understand the underlying motivations for their involvement. Many female members coming from impoverished backgrounds join gangs in order to have access to the opportunities gangs provide for finding a mate who can offer protection and financial security. Women's roles within the gang are often centered around their relationships with the male members. Their dependence on the male members engenders greater competition between female members who seek to protect their partnership from female rivals. Thereby leading women to participate in both direct and indirect aggression to derogate rivals of their current or prospective mates. Females tend to use such tactics to find a long-term, financially-stable mate able to support herself and her children (Arnocky, Ribout, Mirza, & Knack, 2014; Benenson, 2013; Buss, 1989; Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Campbell, 1999; Campbell, 2013).

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