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Street Encounters: betrayal and belonging in youth gangs

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Anthropologist Julia Sauma argues that in understanding what draws young people to gangs, UK practitioners could learn from Brazilian outreach workers and their efforts to relate to the lives of street children caught in the drug trade in Rio de Janeiro.

It has become rare in Britain to read a newspaper or watch a news bulletin that does not mention youth gangs and violence and their rising presence on our streets. An estimated six per cent of British young people aged between ten and 19 belonged to a gang in 2006 – rising to 12 per cent of 14- to 16-year-olds (Sharp et al 2006). The link between these gangs and violence is also undisputed and more recent media reports claim 26 teenage killings in London in 2007 alone. What kind of society do we live in where children own guns and teenagers brutalise adults?

This might feel like a 21st-century debate, but it is in fact one of the oldest questions in human history – concerns about youth delinquency, rebellion and immorality crop up repeatedly throughout recorded human history. And yet if we are to respond to them effectively, we need to understand the complex factors that underpin youth gangs.

The way of the street in Rio

Having had seven years of personal experience working in various capacities with street children and the non-government organisations that try to help them in the Brazilian city of Rio de Janeiro, I am fascinated by parallels and differences between street kids in Rio and youth gangs in the UK. The socio-economic situations of these two countries are very different and create a different set of structures for the proliferation of youth gangs. However, at the root of gang behaviour are specific relational problems that can be compared cross-nationally, and provide important lessons for each side. By looking in more detail at the situation in Rio, we can begin the process of unlocking and penetrating this complex situation, and the keys to this are the outreach personnel who work with these young people.

During the year of my final research piece on this topic in Rio, from the group of approximately forty children and teenagers that I worked with, at least one child was killed, another stabbed, four received bullet wounds, one was thrown from a flyover, one was set on fire while he slept, another died of an overdose... the list goes on. The children and teenagers speak of these events with sadness and anger, especially when they remember those friends who have died, or when there has been a particularly vicious attack on the place where they sleep as a group. It is also important to remember that these children and teenagers fight and kill. This is a group whose members must establish a conscious relationship with death, and therefore with life, early on in their lives.

The drugs trade and factions appear as the focus of many of the experiences between street children and teenagers; experiences marked by death, as well as by betrayal and belonging. In Rio, belonging to one or other faction is important in a city territorially divided by different 'commandos'. The faction determines their relationships with other street children and teenagers: they are 'enemies' of those who belong to other factions and a meeting between two groups – on the street, in a shelter or in prison – results in serious injury and even death. As a result, the street children and teenagers avoid leaving the territory of the faction to which they belong.

At the same time, on the street the drugs trade is connected with other practices and relationships that perpetuate a rejection of the 'adult world'. The drug gangs, in their conflict with the State, subsume rebellion to the hierarchy of the faction (Barbosa 1998). However, the street children and teenagers dribble this appropriation through constant relational movements that reject this 'adult world' as the organisation of identity and power. The children and teenagers participate in the drugs trade in minor roles, as drug runners or look-outs; however, they have their own independent organisation. This is not so marked by a hierarchy: the street children do not have one owner and they do not form one group. The street allows them to connect to the trade without becoming imprisoned by it.

Their relationships with other children and teenagers, who are involved in the faction to varying degrees, provide a means by which to approximate or distance themselves from the trade when necessary. In the group that I studied, most of the children and teenagers know each other well and sleep in one place together, but there is no central control and the group is constantly reformed. Street experience is based on mutability: one teenager is imprisoned, another returns to his or her home, another becomes ill and the ones who remain on the streets continue to connect and reconnect with the other street children and teenagers.

Today's territorial control of street children and teenagers did not begin with the drugs trade. Maria, outreach worker for the group I studied, and ex-street child, also remembers how in her time (in which there was no control by the drug factions) the street children and teenagers created territorial division themselves:

'We set up factions among ourselves; I wasn't allowed to go to certain streets; I was an enemy of those streets. Not that I [really] was ... people [from our location] ... couldn't go to those streets, and if a boy from that street went to one of our streets we would have a fight, it was madness. It was among ourselves that we formed [factions] just like our kids do today ... Our kids are not drug dealers, they [choose] the name of a faction because it makes them stronger... Factions belong to those in the shantytowns. [In the children's case] it is as if it were a clothes label, they feel more important using such and such a label; he says he belongs to the faction [simply] to feel more important, because the faction doesn't give anything to him. It was the same in my time, I was what I was [in order] to have a [higher] position ... and not because I wanted to be that. If I was

alone I would be battered; in the group I was also beaten up, but at least I was in a group. You can see it today, the children fight all the time but they stay in the group.’ (December 2005)

Belonging to a drugs faction does not trap the children; it only really consumes them when they accept that identity in full as adults. What it provides is a means of creating and maintaining fluid group relations. This is not a style of organisation that belongs exclusively to the street: it can be found in many different environments – at school, in the shelter, in the neighbourhood – but on the street it gains new strength.

In these environments the children and teenagers organise themselves in the absence of adults. However, the forms they take are heavily influenced by relationships with adults. In the school playground, children and teenagers play out the roles they are in the process of learning and interpreting from adults. On the street they live in constant opposition to those roles and the social forms they engender. The crucial questions are: Why do they resist so forcefully? And what effect does this resistance have for their own relations with each other and with adults?

I am better placed to answer these questions in the Brazilian context, but I believe that connections can be made to the situation in the UK and other places where youth gangs proliferate. Resistance to the adult world can be connected to the experiences children have with them, and especially with violent adults, be they parents, family members, police officers, teachers, social workers, drug dealers or local business-people. I talk about violence not only in the physical sense; violence is also seen in a betrayal of relationship by adults who lie, who neglect, who undermine and who betray the trust that these young people need to develop a positive association with adults. These young people are witnesses to how these betrayals have led their own parents, families and neighbours to become stuck in often humiliating and constraining hierarchical relationships, which they want to escape. (See Jankowski 1991, Phillips 1999, Kontos et al 2003, Dimitriadis 2003.)

In Rio, the street provides a temporary solution of escape, but the children and teenagers know that they will eventually have to grow up, despite their best efforts to put adulthood on hold. The options they see as adults are clear to them: become a drug dealer, a tramp or a poor worker. None of these is considered an attractive option and their fate is dependent on which path they eventually take. This is a situation that is referred to in many studies about street gangs. Jankowski (1991) connects it to the alternative types of social organisation generated as a result of extreme ‘marginalisation’ experienced by certain sections of society. The failure of policymakers to deal with gangs, according to Jankowski and others, is their failure to acknowledge the logic behind gang organisation.

In my own interpretation, the failure is the lack of realisation that in the presence of such ‘marginalisation’, life does not strain to survive, it actually continues forcefully. In youth gangs, both those that are independent of and those affiliated to adult gangs, life is based on intense experiences with other children, teenagers and adults. For groups of youths who are rarely listened to, the opportunities for living without constraints offered to them

by gangs are as significant as the potential death that joining can bring.

The importance of the relationships formed between outreach workers and street children and teenagers is also clear. For professionals who have been street children and gang members themselves at one stage, understanding the motivations for these young people's actions provided an important base for engagement. This does not simply take the form of attempts to remove individual children and teenagers from the streets; it shows its efficacy most strongly in the ability of the outreach workers to understand the relationships formed within the gangs and to take them seriously. Unfortunately, the efforts of these committed professionals are constantly hampered by an internally hierarchised social service, which undermines their expertise and which is structured to deal with these young people only as isolated individuals rather than as human beings dependent on meaningful relationships.

Julia Sauma is a PhD student in London.

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