

Being a Good Blood

Examining the Possibilities of Resistance to Gender Discourses of “Gangsta” Identity Among Young Men in Schools in Auckland

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Abstract

This article maps out the gangsta discourse, which invites young men to join crews, tag, fight, wear colours, and affiliate themselves to the Crips or Bloods. It shows that there are a variety of positions young men can take up with regard to the gangsta discourse: accommodation, resistance and ambivalence. It looks in detail at ways young men actively resist this discourse by not joining gangs. It also suggests practical strategies for engaging in conversation with young men who are ambivalent about gang involvement.

The aim of this article is to examine the possibilities of resistance to a dominant gender discourse of being a “gangsta”, which has captured the experience of some young men living in Auckland. In my work as a guidance counsellor, I am aware of cultural invitations which ask young men to identify as gangstas. But rather than taking up a deterministic view of young men as inevitably joining gangs, perhaps as something biological, I have instead taken up the position that the gangsta identity can be and is being resisted by young men, who lay claim to other loyalties in their lives. This article aims to raise awareness of the ability of young men to act in thoughtful ways in relation to the cultural invitations of taking up gangsta identity. It also suggests counselling strategies that facilitate a dissonance between the gangsta lifestyle and what young men hope for their lives.

Defining the terms

Gangstas

Although there is very little academic literature on the nature of gangstas in New Zealand, Erin Eggleston (2000) tracks the “Americanism” of youth culture in New Zealand from the 1980s, and its appeal to young people struggling to establish an identity. She points to the influence of the gang film *Colors* as the beginning of “Crips” and

“Bloods” gangs in New Zealand. Eggleston suggests that this film was an inspiration for many young New Zealanders who attempted to emulate the romanticised version of street life that the movie depicts.

There is, however, some awareness in the media of the attraction of gangs for young New Zealanders. In 2005, the documentary TV programme *60 Minutes* interviewed young men involved in youth gangs. Participants were able to define what being a gangsta is and illustrate how they are influenced by this lifestyle. To one participant, gangstas “sell drugs, do an armed robbery, burgle someone’s house and possibly rape someone.”

In an episode of the TV news programme *Campbell Live* (2005) entitled “Gangster culture in New Zealand”, young people in South Auckland were interviewed, all of whom had been expelled from school and were involved in gangs. One member of a crew in Otara defined being a gangsta as “not giving a f—k about anyone or anything.” The programme pointed to American hip-hop videos as “painting American gangstas as a glamorous lifestyle for young warriors.”

In this article, the word gangsta refers to an identity discourse that invites young men to join a crew, tag, fight, wear colours, perform gang salutes, get involved in petty crime, take up a staunch attitude, and affiliate themselves to one of the Los Angeles street gangs, the Crips or the Bloods.

Gender identity discourses

Discourses are systematic ways of viewing the world. Discourses are “sets of meanings, metaphors and representations, images, stories and statements” that produce meaning about the world and ourselves in it (Burr, 1995, p. 48). Discourses construct us as a subject—for example, as mother, husband, manager, counsellor, etc. They address us as a particular kind of person, and our choice is to accept or resist these subject positions (Burr, 1995). Not all discourses carry equal weight or power, however; some are dominant and some are marginalised (Weedon, 1987). Gangsta identity is one dominant gender discourse that hails young men, and it is specific to urban New Zealand cultural contexts at this time (though heavily influenced by America).

When young men take up a position in this discourse, they are positioned by it to act, speak and behave in certain ways (Davies & Harré, 1990). The gangsta discourse specifies a range of behaviours, attitudes, actions and talk in order to be a gangsta. This particular discourse hails young men as subjects and invites them to act in this way in their social world (Althusser, 1984). However, gangsta identity, rather than being thought of as a naturally unfolding story for young men, can be seen as socially constructed through its performance by young men.

The social constructionist view of gender suggests that identity is performed and enacted rather than being intrinsic to a person (Butler, 1990). It may be more useful to talk about ongoing gender projects: we are *doing gender* actively in interaction, rather than simply *being* a man or woman (Connell, 2002). Identity may also be seen as being socially negotiated and renegotiated in communities of people (White, 2001). If we look at gangsta identity in these terms, it is something that is performed by young men on the social stage at school, or on the streets, in interactions with other young men, young women, and others such as families, communities and the courts.

Resistance

In this article, I am using the word resistance to describe taking up a position of protest with regard to the gangsta discourse. Bordo (1993) defines resistance as “all behaviours, events and social formations that challenge or disrupt prevailing power relations” (p. 199). In applying resistance to subject positioning, we see young men can resist being positioned as a gangsta by choosing not to get involved in gangs or identifying as a gangsta. They may also choose to identify themselves with another gender discourse (such as being a sportsman). In this way, young men challenge subject positions offered by this discourse and construct for themselves alternative or counter discourses (Weedon, 1987). The first step in enabling resistance to happen is for young men to become critically aware of the discourses in which they are positioned (Burr, 1995).

Opening space for conversations about gangsta identity

Male gender identity has not been subject to as much scrutiny as female gender identity. It is often seen as invisible, natural and normal, or “the standard case, the usual pattern, synonymous with humanity in general” (Edley & Wetherell, 1995, p. 2). This invisibility can make it difficult to discuss, and yet gender identity does have very real effects on the lives of young men.

In opening space for conversations around gangsta identity, my ethical stance is one of being non-judgemental, inquiring, and taking up a position of deconstructive listening (Freedman & Combs, 1996). This involves listening with an ear for the gaps and ambiguities of a client’s story, and the different meanings they make of it. Deconstructive listening also involves keeping an ear out for how a client is being shaped and positioned in the cultural world. Crocket, Drewery, McKenzie, Smith, and Winslade (2004) speak about the importance of “engaging deconstructively with the discourses that are offering people positions in stories or trajectories that they are experiencing as problematic” (p. 64).

Externalising the dominant discourse of being a gangsta

Young men who present for counselling don't often talk directly about their street lives, yet the problems they do bring (fighting, truancy, petty crime) are often linked to this. In taking up a curious stance with regard to young men and their street lives, I have become more aware of gangsta identities and young men's relationships to those identities. However, rather than assuming I know what a client means when they use the word "gangsta", I invite them to give an account of what this means to them. In this way, the gangsta discourse that hails urban young men can be made more visible, and thus more able to be resisted.

In making the gangsta identity more visible, I ask questions such as:

- Who is a gangsta?
- What does it mean to be a gangsta?
- What does a gangsta do?
- Do you know people who want to be a gangsta?
- How do they do "being a gangsta"?

In my conversations, I found that some young men were able to verbalise clearly the gangsta discourse. Kieran explained that gangstas do over cars, sell drugs, tag, wear bandannas in gang colours, and are rugged and staunch. Real gangstas are Tupac, Snoop Dogg and Dr Dre, who have guns and are into "P". Karl also said that a gangsta is like Tupac. According to him, a gangsta starts fights, smokes, drinks, tags and is into stealing. For Sione, a gangsta is like Jake the Muss (from the film *Once Were Warriors*), a guy who would "bash you as soon as look at you." Gangstas wear bling and Air Force Ones. For Cruz, a gangsta is like Tupac, with his attitude of "f—k the police." Gangstas are into crime, fame and being "America's most wanted." They are into stealing, tagging, wearing baggy clothes, keeping their chin up, and having lots of mates. These boys were able to identify the gangsta discourse, which they had been exposed to through American DVDs, CDs, movies and television programmes that glamorise the gangsta lifestyle.

Accommodating to the gangsta discourse

As well as being aware of American hip-hop gangstas, the young men I talked to knew people around them who were being gangstas, or were themselves enacting this discourse. Three clients had taken up positions of accommodation to the discourse, and were enacting it in their school and communities. Timothy had seen videos on the

Internet of real drive-by shootings in Los Angeles. He liked watching videos such as *Colors*, *Blood In Blood Out* and *Gang Tapes*. He wanted to go to Los Angeles and meet the famous rappers. He was involved in a crew and was in trouble for fighting at school. He spent his time with the crew on the weekends. He had been involved in numerous fights in the community. Kieran also wanted to go to Los Angeles and be in a gang. He was in a crew himself and identified as a Crip. Jason had lived in Los Angeles for a short time and witnessed street fighting and a drive-by shooting. For him this was like “seeing the real world.” He strongly identified as a Crip and had recently been caught by police for assault with a weapon. His explanation of his involvement in a crew was that “we’re just being boys.”

Resisting the gangsta discourse

Although some young men take up a position of accommodation with the gangsta discourse, others challenge this subject position and construct alternative discourses. Resistance happens when there is a gap between the subject position in a discourse and an individual’s personal interest (Weedon, 1987). In my work as a counsellor I have been able to open space for the telling of stories of resistance to gangsta discourses. In this way, young men are able to speak for themselves as the author of their own lives (Davies, 1991). In talking with young men about their street lives, I was alert to the possibilities of unique outcomes—moments when they resisted the invitations and when their choices spoke of their desire to live their life differently (White & Epston, 1990). When a unique outcome came to light of one client’s choice not to be involved in a gang, I asked more inquiring questions about what led him to take up this position.

Counter-loyalties

The boys who gave the strongest accounts of resistance often had other loyalties in their lives which competed with the gangsta loyalties. Cruz was asked to join a crew on his street. Both his father and his uncle had been in gangs themselves, as had his aunties. His father, however, did not want Cruz to join a gang as this could lead to him being taken into care. Cruz could identify very clearly his father’s attitude towards gangs and this dissuaded him from joining. Cruz also recalled his girlfriend crying when he talked about gangs, and that she didn’t want him to get into drugs.

Randall had a family background of gang involvement and identified as a Blood. However, he did have a school friend who actively tried to stop him fighting and put pressure on him to go to school. Randall was aware that this friend wanted him to have a better future. Adam was asked to join a crew when he was walking to the dairy. He said no because he didn’t want to get into marijuana. He believes that crews are bad

and that people in crews want to kill people for no reason. He goes to church and wants to follow God.

One dimension of gang involvement may be that the youth gangs operate as a “proxy family unit” that meets social needs and provides support and protection for its members (Centre for Social Research and Evaluation, 2006, p. 15). From the testimonies of some young men it appears that having strong familial and community ties can strengthen the resolve of young people to resist gang involvement.

Looking for gaps in the identity

There is another, more immediate form of resistance, whereby a client has a moment of realisation that the gangsta identity simply does not fit him. If, for a moment, identity is seen metaphorically as a set of clothing which young men are invited to wear, there are times when the clothing is ill-fitting. There may be key moments in the talk when clients notice the gap between what the identity expects of them and who they believe they are as a person. This can lead on to taking up a more intentional position of resistance.

Identities can be very powerful in shaping people’s experience of themselves (White, 2001). Persons can live out the identity conclusions they believe about themselves and may not draw upon more varied experiences of identity. Michael White uses what he calls “re-authoring conversations” to look for points of entry into alternative identities people can access. These alternative identities may appear simply as faint traces, full of gaps and not clearly named (White, 2005). Re-authoring conversations around gangsta identity require the counsellor to be alert to gaps where the identity does not fit, and to thin traces of other identity stories that appear in the talk.

Damian was part of a crew in Otara and was into “tagging, raves and drugs.” He identified as a Blood. The change for him was when he was asked to become a drug dealer and he realised, “It’s just not me,” and, “I’m not that kind of person.” He was aware of other dealers who had started young and were now addicts, and he did not want this for his life. He now describes himself as a “retired” Blood.

This was a key moment when, for Damian, the identity of drug dealer did not fit him. Damian knew what was involved in being a drug dealer and what could be expected for him in the future (probable addiction), and that this was not what he wanted for his life. Even though there were only thin traces of an alternative identity, one in which he was not the kind of person who deals drugs, this was an entry point for re-authoring conversations around his identity.

Damian also took up a new subject position in the discourse, that of “retired” Blood. I was able to use this description in conversations with another client whose father had

retired from a gang but who was still very involved in a gang himself. It led on to questions about the reasons behind retiring, how one does this, how one would know when the right time was, and what life might be like after retiring.

Multiple identities

As well as there being gaps in identities that can lead towards resistance, there are also times when a person can take up multiple identities. Identities themselves, rather than being fixed and stable, are often shifting, fluid and subject to revision. Identity is “not single-storied but multi-storied” (White, 1996). It is arguably not possible to enact all the requirements of a particular discourse, and people often take up multiple identities (Butler, 1990). No one can be a gangsta all the time, and young men can pick up other identities, which are sometimes in conflict with the gangsta identity. This enacting of multiple identities can lead towards resistance, as young persons realise that they have other identities on offer which may be more appealing.

Regan was on his last warning from police because of a number of assaults he had made. He had a street name and was well known in the area for tagging. Sometimes he had “evil thoughts” about hurting others. He knew the street name had brought him fame among his peers. His girlfriend disliked the fighting and wanted him to give up being in a crew. In conversation we were able to map out the appeal to him of his street name and what kind of life it expected of him. The other identity discourse that he drew on was located in his relationship with his sisters, who saw him as a “sweet, sensitive guy” at home. I was interested in how he was able to draw on both identities. There were many ways in which he was drawn to the identity of being a sweet, sensitive guy, although this was in conflict with his street identity. He was thoughtful about what kind of future he wanted and how this differed from the kind of future the street name imagined for him.

Justin was on curfew by the police after being caught tagging with his cousin. He was threatened with being sent to a boys’ home if caught one more time. His cousin was “really gangsta”, and by this he meant “trying to please others, doing what others want.” Justin didn’t want to do that. His mother wanted him to be a church boy and behave well. He wanted to be both a church boy and a gangsta. He was involved in the cultural group at school, went to church and had a street life in the evenings and weekends. We talked about the friends around him who were being gangstas and we scaled how involved in it they were. He did not want to be as much of a gangsta as his cousin, who was into stealing cars and fighting. We discussed what position he wanted to take up with regard to being a gangsta. When I saw him a few months later, he said he had decided not to be in a gang any more.

Working with ambivalence towards gangsta identity

Motivational interviewing

In talking with young men who are enacting the gangsta discourse and are ambivalent about change, I have found motivational interviewing a useful strategy. The aim of motivational interviewing is that the client presents the argument for change. The counsellor acts to develop the client's own motivation through tipping the decisional balance away from ambivalence and towards change (Miller & Rollnick, 1992).

One of the main strategies of this modality is the counsellor amplifying the discrepancy in the client's mind between his present behaviour and the broader goals for his life. An awareness of the costs of his present behaviour can often be a trigger for change. Another aspect of this modality is eliciting self-motivational statements from the client about his desire for change. There are four different kinds of motivational statements: problem recognition, expression of concern, intention to change, and optimism for change. It is the counsellor's task to facilitate the client's expression of these statements and support the belief that change is possible (Miller & Rollnick, 1992).

In talking with Micah, who is involved in a crew, I characterised his choices as following the gangsta path or taking up another or several paths. I asked him what kind of future being a gangsta might predict for him. He was aware of the costs of his present behaviour ("I could get killed"), as he had witnessed violence in his town. He saw this as being a "bad" path. When I asked him how he saw it as a bad path when others who were gangstas did not, he replied that he is only a "beginner" gangsta.

In our conversation, I listened for areas of dissonance in Micah's life between the gangsta identity and the other terrain of his life: his values, dreams, hopes and intentions. I inquired about when he was first concerned about being a gangsta. For Micah there was a discrepancy between being a gangsta (which often required truancy) and his desire to get a good education. He was aware of some broader goals for his life, of doing well at school and getting involved in rugby.

With Micah, I mapped out the different loyalties in his life around the gangsta identity. He identified people who wanted him to be a gangsta (his friends, cousins and uncles) and those who did not (his mother). He was finding this pull uncomfortable. I wondered with him how he could strengthen the sense of his mother being an ally.

In wanting to open space for subtle, client-directed change, I explored with Micah his preferences for his life around the gangsta discourse. On a whiteboard I drew a scale, with being "a little bit gangsta" on one end and "fully gangsta" on the other. I invited him to position his friends and family on this scale, and then himself. Micah

decided he wanted to be a little bit gangsta rather than being fully into it. I inquired further about this subject position. For Micah this meant coming to school, not doing gangsta stuff, going straight home after school, doing his homework, etc. I was interested in who might support these important changes. He thought he might be able to talk to his mother about it, and to continue to come to counselling.

In conversations with Micah, I was aware that being a gangsta was something he acted and performed on the streets, rather than something innate. In his own words: “The more I go out, the more I become a gangsta.”

Randall strongly identified as being a Blood, and said that his whole family were Bloods. His grandmother was tolerant of his crew involvement as long as he didn’t get into too much trouble. When I asked him what kind of future being a Blood predicted for him, he replied, “Fighting, stealing, jail—a bad future.”

When we looked at how his friends and family were positioned on the gangsta scale, Randall knew one friend who identified himself as a Blood but didn’t fight. Randall called this “being a good Blood.” This seemed to be a new subject position and I was interested in how this was enacted. According to Randall, a good Blood doesn’t fight, walks away, and ignores trouble. He had seen his friend do this a number of times. I was interested in what change would be required if Randall was to take up being a good Blood. For Randall this meant stopping fighting at school and on the streets, and stopping having a Blood’s attitude. He also thought that being a good Blood might mean being humble. I explored with him being humble as an alternative construction of identity, and what this might offer him.

Maintaining change

In conversations with young men around gangsta identity, the counsellor can facilitate change talk by inviting clients to consider their position on the gangsta scale and investigating their preferences for their lives. This can lead towards the client proposing significant shifts in position, and subtle but important steps towards change. In terms of making change more effective and lasting, it is important to tap into the client’s own motivation for change, and for the client to set realistic goals.

Roman identified as a Crip and did not want to retire, but he did voice a desire “not to do the gangsta stuff any more.” His motivation for change was that he didn’t want his six-year-old cousin to end up as a “hard-core Crip” by emulating him. Roman wanted to position himself as “a humble Crip”, which for him meant “not being ruthless”, not getting angry over little things or having grudges against people. Roman came up with some phrases he could use if his mates tried to persuade him to do gangsta stuff, such as “I don’t do that stuff any more,” and “I’m no longer in the

game.” He also decided to tell two people in his family about his desire to “not do gangsta stuff any more.”

Conclusion

In this article I have sought to trouble some of the taken-for-granted ideas of it being natural for young men to start crews, wear colours and fight. I have shown that this is what young men *do* rather than what they *are*. While there are certainly family contexts which support or tolerate crews, young men are still able to engage thoughtfully with their choices in how they live their lives. I have shown that gangsta identity itself is not total; it is a way of being that never fully encompasses a person’s lived experience. I have also endeavoured to show that it is contested; that it is something young men struggle with as they weigh up what is important to them and what they hope for their lives.

I have looked at the gangsta identity discourse itself and how it hails young men. I have mapped out a variety of subject positions which young men take up in the light of this: accommodation, resistance, and ambivalence. As well as an outright decision to resist being involved in a crew, there are other young men who are aware of the gaps—where they don’t fit with being a gangsta. Some young men are trying to live out conflicting identities at home and on the street. I have also highlighted other subject positions in the gangsta discourse, such as being a “retired” Blood or a “good” Blood, which suggest some measure of shift from fully being a gangsta.

Broader implications—for society

In examining the broader implications of this research, I am aware of the limited amount of choice for young men who don’t fit with the gangsta discourse, yet are not aware of other ways of being. There are few other gender discourses that are so clearly mapped out in their minds. It would be desirable for young men to have a range of identities on offer, not just one that can be potentially damaging to themselves, and their families and communities.

As we have seen, for some young men contexts such as friends, families, sports clubs or churches can provide a sense of belonging, connection and relationship that brings meaning to their lives. As well as this, hip-hop can act as an alternative identity on offer to young men. Young men can take up other positions in the contemporary hip-hop culture which do not replicate gangsta discourses. One client took steps away from being a gangsta, and started his own hip-hop group which became well-known.

Broader implications—for counsellors

As a female counsellor, I am aware of some of the established ideas of gender matching between counsellor and client. I have found that it is possible to open space for thoughtful discussion with young men about their lives, but that I do need to be aware of my gender thinking and prejudices. Johnella Bird (2000) talks about the gender blindness that can occur when we as therapists are immersed in prevailing cultural ideas and gender practices.

I am very aware of the language I use in constructing questions around street lives and gangsta identity, so that I do not take up a deterministic view. Rather, I ask questions that reflect my stance of inquiring with them about their lives. I try not to reproduce cultural discourses of young men as liking danger and risk, and being unaware of the effects of their actions on others. As we have seen, the young men in this article were aware of dangers, and did want to make some changes to their lives. The young men that I spoke to about their street lives and gangsta identity had not often spoken to anyone before about it. Some were surprised that a female counsellor was aware of this largely male domain in their lives. Others were open to talking about it, and its implications for home and school, and wanted to set goals around how they would do things differently.

Lastly, in terms of making change more effective, it is important to acknowledge that one-to-one counselling is only part of the picture, and that effective interventions involve engaging with parents, who may be supported through social work or counselling, to draw young men more tightly back into families.

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