

The Social Identity Theory:  
Explanation of Gang Members as Terrorist in the United States

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President George W. Bush once said, “Any government that supports, protects or harbors terrorists is complicit in the murder of innocent and equally guilty of terrorist crimes” (BrainyQuote, 2011). No doubt in an American mind that this is a powerful and true statement. However, what if the statement had the slightest alteration; more specifically, what if the wording was slightly altered to read: Any government that supports, protects, or harbors *gang members* is complicit in the murder of innocent and equally guilty of *gang member* crimes. How does this alteration make the American feel now? In an interview in February 2011, with Supervisory Special Agent Michael Stansbury on the seriousness of gangs the following statement was made: “An estimated one million gang members are infiltrating the nation’s communities. We call them urban terrorists” (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2011). With the labeling of gang members as ‘urban terrorists’ this helps to put into perspective the horrendous association of gang members and the gang activity. Through the emphasis of the Social Identity Theory this paper will look at the dynamics of a gang member and how it is a form of terrorism in the United States. For the purposes of this paper, the term terrorism will be defined as an act of violence or threat of violence carried out by an individual or group of individuals against members of a negatively referenced, contrasting group (Hamden, n.d.). Thus, a terrorist is an individual who carries out the acts of terror as described above. A gang is often defined as such an affiliation by its members; it often possesses organizational features, such as a name, a geographical area or location, and has regular meetings or assemblies; and it often engages in criminal activity (Sheley et al., 1995). Since the use of social theory is the basis for this paper, there is a disregard of mental or personality disorders as the cause for antisocial or violent behavior. Social Identity Theory is a general theory of self that can be examined through three different components, the concept and bases of identity, the activation of identities and identity

saliency, and the cognitive and motivational process (Stets & Burke, 2000). It is through these core components that dynamics of gang members and terrorists will be looked at.

For the Social Identity Theory, the concept of identity is via a category or group. The identity is constructed when a person acknowledges that he/she belongs to a social category or group. A social group is often defined as a set of persons who view themselves as members of the same social category, and hold a common social identification (Stets & Burke, 2000). Within the process of obtaining a social identity the methods incorporated are social categorization and social comparison. Self categorization is a process in which the self impulsively categorizes, classifies, or names itself, as an object would be, in ways that relate to other social classifications. The social category in which people assign themselves to are based on parts of the structured society that is already in existence; individuals are born into an already preceding structured society. Of course, it is through the unique combination of different social categories that the person bases his or her social concept of identity off of (Stets & Burke, 2000). An example of self categorization in the context of gang members would be through culture or community, and family or peer influence. Culture is part of a structured society that has been found to be intertwined with the development of self identity. It is also possible that the community a person is born into is an unstable condition or in the state of anomie (Arfaniarromo, n.d.). When there is an imbalance between the socially acceptable goals and the available means in which one is to obtain those goals, an individual can be affected by this condition. As a result, one may seek familiarity through the only mediating means possible, a gang, as an effort in strengthening their identity and attempting to reach out to the traditional culture. There is also a tendency for the community to stem a self-fulfilling prophecy of an individual, which increases their self identity to be centered on that of a gang member (Arfaniarromo, n.d.). It is not

uncommon for a community that is saturated in gang activity to stigmatize a young person with condescending characteristics so greatly that the very community in which he or she lives in is forming a structured category for one's self identity. Another structured society that precedes the individual is the family. Individuals whose families have minimal levels of socialization and who put little emphasis on the expression of affection and emotions between one another have an increased likelihood of becoming a gang member, compared to their counterparts. An individual who is part of a family unit, who lacks supervision, for one reason or another, also has a greater tendency to affiliate his or her self identity with that of a gang member (Arfaniarromo, n.d.).

Gang members are allowed to go unsupervised by parents who are either absent or naïve. A study revealed that the alienation from parents and the family was the initial cause for an individual to turn to gang involvement. The study also established lack of a male figure and rejection by the family as related characteristics of gang members (Craig et al., 2002). There is also an intense pressure put upon an individual by their peers. When the structured society through peer influence makes being a gang member seems glamorous and successful then there is an increased likelihood that the individual will be influenced into becoming a gang member.

Another extrinsic influence on an individual that is part of the environment he or she is born into is the media (Gang Psychology, n.d.). Gang violence is portrayed as being acceptable and as a valid means to an end through television, movies, and music. When a young person is not able to differentiate what is culturally and socially acceptable, often due to the lack of parent involvement, gang violence and being a gang member will likely become the self identity of that individual. External influences, such as the described structured societies, also have an impact on the development of crime and delinquent related motivations and direction (Arfaniarromo, n.d.).

If a family member is involved in gang activity there is a direct impact on the individual, and that

individual will most likely follow suit in the demonstration of deviant and criminal behavior. The lack of affection by family members and the denigrating expectations of the individual can lead to the criminal achievement by a gang member. It is interesting to note that many of these same concepts of identity, through self categorization, that are displayed by gang members are also shown by terrorists. Common characteristics of terrorist include history of childhood trauma; family where the father was either absent or estranged; joining of terrorist group was either by default (based on family involvement), peer pressure, or little discouragement from surrounding culture and society (Borum, 2004; Stahelski, 2004; Hamden, n.d.).

Self comparison is the process of self identity that allows an individual to categorize him or herself as the in-group, by having similarities, and sees others as the out-group because they differ from his or her self identity. It is through the social comparison methods that one may feel self-enhancing results (Stets & Burke, 2000). When the in-group characteristics are seen as similar and being positive, the individual will have a feeling of satisfaction and improvement of oneself by acting out the dimensions of the in-group. It is through the self comparison methods that one derives a positive experience and enhancement from gang involvement. As a gang member, the fulfillment of traditional achievements may be lacking, but that often means that sense of accomplishment is obtained via other avenues. Alternative socialization is often developed through the inner workings of a gang, and often in the form of deviant or criminal behavior (Arfaniarromo, n.d.). Fulfillment that was lacking from accepted social entities, such as school involvement, is not obtained through the lifestyle of a gang member. The gang serves as a replacement of the individual's biological family; by acting as a surrogate family the gang provides the member with a supplement for his or her needs. When gang members form a love and kinship with one another, the enhancement of oneself by being part of the in-group is so

prominent that the gang has effectively taken the place of the family (Gang Psychology, n.d.). Since the gang involvement is finally granting the individual with positive emotions, the ideals of parents or society is outweighed (Arfaniarromo, n.d.). According to a gang member, there is this overwhelming attitude that society has failed them. So when an individual feels like he or she is part of the in-group and is actually being accepted, there is a bond and connection that is very hard to break. There is an acquired companionship, provided support, respect between peers, cure of loneliness, need for glorification, rejection of standard, and security of affection is gained when an individual joins a gang (Edmonton Police Service, 2010; Philippe, 2008). Since achievement in school is often seen as a normal and socially accepted achievement an individual involved in gang membership will see those aspects as part of the out-group. In the same study as mentioned previously, there was a high rate of school dropouts among gang members due to the inadequacy the individual exhibited (Craig et al., 2002). Similar to the process self categorization, terrorist can also attribute the self enhancing aspects of in-group through self comparison. Terrorist strive for belonging and are often joiners who cannot form consistent group identities outside of the home (Borum, 2004; Stahelski, 2004). The terrorist group provides a close knit family environment, meaningful existence, fulfillment of emotional needs, enhanced sense of importance, and most of all, a welcoming into the group (Hamden, n.d.).

After one has a concept of self identity the next part of the identity component of Social Identity Theory is the bases of identity. Once an individual obtains a self identity the bases of that identity takes ones perception and involvement to the next level; the group's view is now the basis of that identity, it is *who* one is. The basis of social identity is the uniformity of the group's perception and group's action (Stets & Burke, 2000). The uniformity of perception in group based identities is displayed in many ways. First, the cognitive category is the way in which

social stereotyping is revealed and enhanced (Stets & Burke, 2000). Through the group perception of in-group and out-group stereotypes, one's own identification is enhanced. The next way the uniformity of perception is revealed is through attitudinal category. There is usually a positive evaluation of the in-group by its members. This identification with the group leads to an increased level of commitment, while decreasing the desire to abandon the group, and increasing the overall attraction to the group (Stets & Burke, 2000). The behavioral category is a third way in which group based identities uniformity is increased. People who label and describe themselves by using the group based identity are more likely to behave with the sameness of the group in which they identify with (Stets & Burke, 2000). When the majority of the group members hold the same perceptions and acts with the same behaviors, the perception of homogeneity is reinforced as a consequence. A logical reason as to why the collective perception and identity of the group is enhanced is because each member of the group holds the similar views as one another, and is initially similar persons that are all in contrast with members of the out-group (Stets & Burke, 2000). Self identity through group based identification is the most influential bases for participation in group behavior. This enhanced level of commitment and attraction to the in-group is often how gangs recruit and keep their members. Since gang members can be of any race, ethnicity, sex, and location it is the prominent identification that influences the behavior of a gang member (Arfaniarromo, n.d.; Edmonton Police Service, 2010). As had been mentioned before, gang members join gangs for the increased feelings and emotions that are associated with in-group identifications; but recruitment is also influenced through the behavioral aspects of gang involvement. Gang members tend to commit more crimes and engage in a variety of different forms of delinquency at a higher rate than the general population (Arfaniarromo, n.d.). Based on the same study that has been referenced, stable gang members

engaged in more fighting behaviors than the non-gang members, have more contact with the police, and are responsible for a disproportionate amount of crime; also, stable gang members reported their friends as being more aggressive and engaging in delinquent behaviors. The actions and behavior of the individual at an early age were problematic for gang members, thus increasing their rejection from prosocial groups and amplifying their similarities and acceptance to deviant, gang related, peer groups (Craig et al., 2002). It is through the continuation and accumulation of these deviant behaviors that one's group based identity is increased. When gang members dress according to the specifics of the gang, are awarded nicknames, and own a weapon this also increases one's bases of identity with the group (Philippe, 2008). Terrorists also display these same bases of identity. Similarly to gang members, terrorist have no gender, race, or national limitations; they partake in actions of the gang, such as giving up their civilian clothes and any behavior patterns that are not conforming to the terrorist group; and have an increased commitment to the group through the continuation of terrorists behaviors and actions. (Stahelski, 2004; Hamden, n.d.).

The activation of identities and identity salience is the next component to the Social Identity Theory. Salience is the activation of one's identity based on the situation that arises and focuses on the characteristics of situations (Stets & Burke, 2000). Through this step of the Social Identity Theory the increase of perception and behavior is further enhanced. Identity salience ties the social requirements of the situation characteristics and the individual interaction. It is through the activation of identity that this component allows a gang member to make his or her own decision depending on the situation. Once a gang member has reached identity salience there is a psychological significance of the group membership. The psychological dynamics and situational accessibility that identity salience provides to the gang member include having a

corrupt purpose for bad, rather than good; finding distorted love and acceptance through the gang involvement, rather than from the family; accepting that being part of gang is satisfactory, rather than striving to be part of something good; and feeling empowered by the instillation of fear and intimidation (LaChapelle, n.d.). The perception and behavior of the gang member has increased and reached a point of no return, when the individual is now making his or her own decisions as to how to react in certain situations. At this point the gang involvement and acceptance has become a necessity to the gang member's life. In comparison to terrorist, the identity salience of gang members and terrorist are similar. When a terrorist commits an act of terror they see their actions as rational. This means that they are stable enough to organize, plan, and execute their act of terror (Habelow, 2003). This level of decision making reflects that the activation of identities is present with terrorist.

The final component of the Social Identity Theory is the cognitive and motivational process. This process has similar aspects to the other components of the theory, but it is further displaying the enhanced dynamics that an individual feels when part of a group. The cognitive process, also known as depersonalization, is when an individual sees him or herself as the in-group prototype rather than as an individual. The depersonalization process of an individual as a member of a group includes the aspects of identification with a category or group and the behavior that is associated with that category or group (Stets & Burke, 2000). The motivational process focuses on the continuation and enhancement of self-esteem. Through the activation of identity, as well as the other components of the Social Identity Theory, individuals will act in a way that enhances their self evaluation of the in-group as a group member (Stets & Burke, 2000). Within the motivational process there are other possible motives that can be a substitute for self esteem. These possible substitutions include self regulation motive, self efficacy motive, and

uncertainty reduction motive. There is also the possibility for multiple motives to be the focus of the group member (Stets & Burke, 2000). The cognitive and motivational process helps to explain certain aspects of gang members. Group cohesiveness, ethnocentrism, social stereotyping, collective action, and cooperation are all forms of the underlying group phenomena that are displayed by this process of the Social Identity Theory. The strongest confirmation to a gang member or terrorist that he or she is part of the group comes from the acceptance by other existing members of the gang or terrorist group (Stets & Burke, 2000). This final component of the Social Identity Theory pulls together all of the discussed aspects of group membership and displays the ultimate enhancement of what it being a gang member or terrorist entails.

In conclusion, the aspects of Social Identity Theory needs to be reiterated as a final display of how gang members and gang activity is in fact a form of terrorism in the United States. As previously discussed, the central components of Social Identity Theory include the concept and different bases of identity, the activation and salience of an identity, and the cognitive and motivational foundations of the theory. It is through similar processes self identification, group based identification, actions and behaviors of an identity, and the cognitive decision making of what group membership includes and the motivations for group membership that display gang members as close comparisons to terrorists. With that I would like to leave you with one final demonstration of the dynamics of a gang member are in fact a form of terrorism in the United States. Through the lyrics and truth of the Black Eyed Peas:

What's wrong with the world, mama

People living like they ain't got no mamas

I think the whole world addicted to the drama

Only attracted to the things that'll bring you trauma

Overseas, yeah, we try to stop terrorism

But we still got terrorist here living

In the USA, the big CIA

The Bloods and the Crips and the KKK

(“Where’s the Love, *Elephunk*, 2003)

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