Gang Innovation, Patriarchy, and Powerlessness: 
Expanding Theory to Reflect American Realities

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Today in our nation's cities, gang behavior is becoming a matter of heated community debate, legislative action, media attention, and major social concern. This paper discusses an expansion of sociologist Robert Merton's Strain Theory in relation to gang behavior with an emphasis on patriarchal ideology and powerlessness. Specifically, young Chicano/Latino and African American gang members are innovative--by selling drugs, for example--not solely because there is blockage to legitimate means to achieve American economic success goals, as Merton would argue, but also innovative--by demonstrating fighting prowess, and committing drive-bys--because our society stresses masculine power: patriarchal ideology. The gang members' need to achieve economic success is compounded with their need to achieve masculine power in a society which blocks them structurally both in relation to their class, and their racial and ethnic status.

When cities grew large enough to develop slums, gangs began to form. The heritage of gang behavior is poverty and its children: abuse, alcoholism, and drug addiction, to name a few. Today we are facing a problem of major proportions in our cities. Gang membership is seemingly growing with no end in sight, and a beleaguered nation, a struggling city, the mother of a gang member all ask: Why? There are probably several answers and more questions. This paper is an attempt to understand the problem of gang delinquency by utilizing already existing theory. Robert Merton's Strain Theory lends itself to the discussion of gang delinquency; however, this paper will expand on the theory and link it to the powerlessness of young minority males and patriarchal ide-
Robert Merton introduced his Strain Theory as a way of explaining the deviant behavior of adults and juveniles. This theory is based on the assumption that American society places a great emphasis on economic success—the only goal for which to strive. Wherever we turn, we are bombarded by messages which "egg us on." They tell us to perform well in school, to have ambition for the future, to emulate heroes and heroines, to win at all costs, to "be all that you can be." Not just the well-to-do, but all classes of people are equally expected to pursue the cultural goal of economic success. This goal is said to be equally available to all.

However, Merton reasoned, the legitimate means of achieving the cultural goal of economic success is not equally available to all people. People who live in the lower social classes do not have an equal opportunity to attain the success goal. They are, in fact, faced with a very real dilemma: society urges them to succeed, to realize the economic success goal; however, society does not really give them the opportunity to reach this height of ambition. According to Merton, lower class people faced with this dilemma will turn to illegitimate means to achieve the success goal. They are likely to turn to deviant and delinquent behavior due to the strain caused by the very real gap between the desire to attain the economic success goal and the opportunity to pursue the legitimate means to the goal.

Merton realized that not all people would respond the same way. He developed a typology of modes of adaptation to the dilemma: 1) the conformist accepts the goal and has access to the institutionalized means; 2) the innovator accepts the goal, but being blocked from the means, pursues illegitimate means; 3) the ritualist no longer pursues the goal but doggedly adheres to the institutionalized means; 4) the retreatist fails at both legitimate and illegitimate means and so essentially rejects both goals and means and "drops out," if you will; and 5) the rebel rejects the economic success goal and the institutionalized means, while creating his/her own unique goal and means.

The only mode of adaptation which need concern us with respect to gang delinquency is the innovator who does accept the goal but is not given the opportunity to realize the goal legitimately. Merton's Strain Theory, then, has attempted to deal with the phenomenon of deviance in general, and the gang member, more specifically. Let us enter the gang member more fully into the equation.

Gangs

As mentioned previously, gangs began to form in this country...
when cities became large enough to develop slums. In the early 1800s, bitter fighting broke out between gangs in New York City and gangs in Boston. In 1926, Frederic Thrasher published his study of gangs in Chicago which revealed that gangs tended to develop in slums where youth were living in crowded conditions. William Foote Whyte also documented gang behavior in one Italian neighborhood in Boston in the 1930s, finding that these "corner boys" sought protection, status, and material assistance within their neighborhoods.

In the 1950s gang behavior centered around defense of territory and proof of strength in fighting, while in the 1960s some gangs joined in the spirit of change and brotherhood of the time, working to improve the lot of their own communities. Walter Miller noted that gang behavior of the 1970s was focused in slum areas of the cities, that there was an increase in violence against innocent bystanders, and that there was an increase in the use of more sophisticated weaponry.

While the 1980s and 1990s have seen some increase in gang membership and gang violence, the media often overstate the case, as noted by David Huizinga and Finn-Aage Esbensen. In fact, these authors note that the very definition of "gang" itself has a profound impact on which youth are cited as among the alleged population of "gang" members in U.S. cities. However, gang violence does seem to be a primary focus of concern in many major cities in the country. According to Martin Sanchez Jankowski, gangs in the 1980s and 1990s tend to be more sophisticated. He notes that the lack of job opportunities and the limited social mobility available to poor and working-class youth have meant that these youth continue their illegal activity well into adulthood. Further, he suggests that poor and working-class youth may emulate and learn from organized crime units who, while losing their hegemony, allow for creative entrepreneurial expansion into the illegal economy.

Gangs in this country are predominantly composed of African American and Chicano/Latino youth. Gang members are typically between the ages of 12 and 21, with peak ages between 16 and 18 years of age. Gang members tend to come from the lower socioeconomic classes and tend to live in the inner cities and ghetto neighborhood areas of our country—often referred to as "hoods" and "barrios." These are young people who often come from dysfunctional, abusive or nonexistent homes. Gangs have a life of their own and they have grown to become a threat to young people who must choose to join or suffer the consequences. Gangs, in other words, are made up of youth who have very few reasons to commit to a family or a society that, from their perspective, offers nothing and delivers nothing. These youth become drug dealers on the streets of South Central Los Angeles with little hope of escaping this fate. In other words, these youthful gang members become the true innovators in Merton's typology of adaptations.
societal goals. The gang member is definitely blocked from attaining the societal goal of economic success\(^{18}\) and has become an innovator. However, Merton's argument is limited in scope. Merton defines his discussion of blocked means to success goals only in terms of economic success goals. Yet, gang members are seeking many different kinds of success. They are seeking success monetarily, as society asks, as well as success as males in a patriarchal society.\(^{19}\)

Our highly specialized and technically advanced society still places a great deal of pressure on males to be the "breadwinner," be ambitious, and achieve. This is yet another success goal which Merton's theory fails to outline. In order to attain Merton's economic success goal, the innovative gang member turns to drug dealing, looting, pimping or other illegitimate means. In order to attain masculine power--a success goal which also carries great weight in our society--the innovative gang member seeks to demonstrate some power in his already powerless state. It is easy to assume, then, that these gang members demonstrate masculine power by being brave, strong, tough, and fiercely adventurous. They have no other legitimate means of power by societal standards. And, contrary to what Albert Cohen, another strain theorist (see Note 4), might argue about differing lower class values, gang members' values are not so very different from society's. In fact, the need for young men to achieve and express masculine power is very much part and parcel of the American way of life and value system.\(^{20}\) These young gang members espouse the middle class value of masculine power but exhibit it in an exaggerated manner because they have no socially sanctioned means of attaining the masculine power goal in any other way. Their behavior, then, is exaggeratedly masculine American and for no other reason than that they do not have the opportunities and resources to "do it" the middle class way.

Perhaps by recognizing this other success goal--masculine power--the theory can be expanded to truly understand the nature of gang delinquency and its hopelessness more fully. Many gang members are blocked from obtaining economic success goals through legitimate means, but they are also blocked from obtaining masculine power in a patriarchal society and culture that stresses the strength, aggressiveness, and competitiveness of men, where males that do not fulfill their role are highly censured. Most young men in this society are brought up to believe they are going to be the provider--the achiever--and this is a goal that is hard to attain in the 'hood or the barrio.

An expansion of Merton's Strain theory, then, might take into account the patriarchal nature of our society and take a look at masculine power ideology at work in the barrio and the 'hood. It might also stress the powerlessness of young men of color who have historically been excluded, denied access, and refused opportunities to participate in the American success agenda. We turn now to these issues.
Patriarchal Ideology and Its Relationship to Powerlessness

Chicano Gangs

Gang members are required to be strong, tough, and ready to "do or die." They know at very young ages, whether they are African American, Chicano, or Tongan that their lives depend on their ability to survive in their barrio or 'hood.

Patriarchal ideology among Chicano gang members is often referred to as machismo. The macho male is the sole provider for the family; he is the protector of wife and children; he is dominant, aggressive and exults in his physical and sexual prowess; he is exaggeratedly aggressive toward women and children; he is the "pants" in the family. All of this has been said of the macho and of the machismo ethic.

However, much research has contested this stereotypical notion of the Chicano in the family, asserting that Chicano/a families are not as patriarchal as commonly believed, and stressing that American culture is generally patriarchal in nature (Zinn 1975, 1982; Ybarra 1982; Williams 1990). Hence, stereotypical arguments about a "culture of poverty" that engenders intergenerational machismo are misleading and deny both the patriarchal nature of American society in general, and the structural antecedents--the powerlessness--which greatly contributes to the behavior of young male gang members.

Maxine Baca Zinn suggests that the macho male is not typical of Chicano/a culture any more than he is typical of American culture. She asserts that both cultures are patriarchal, and therefore both can encourage male dominance: patriarchal ideology. Zinn further states that the macho male existent in the Chicano/a family and culture can be addressed as adhering to the machismo ethic only to the extent that structural conditions confine him to such a role. She argues, then, that the macho male is the natural outgrowth of oppressive circumstances. She also notes that the "emphasis on masculinity might stem from the fact that alternative roles and identity sources are systematically blocked from men in certain social categories." Zinn stresses that the masculine power ideology of machismo is a definite reaction to suppression and domination, contending that if systems of "social inequality limit men's access to societally valued resources, they will contribute to sexual stratification." This is easily a reference to the gang member, whose youth is spent in the ghetto and who lives out this exaggerated masculine role, because "manhood takes on greater importance for those who do not have access to socially valued roles."

Alex Saragoza argues that gangs arose in Chicano/a neighborhoods due to the political and economic disenfranchisement of Chicano/a families. Gangs became a way of affirming manhood denied by the
larger society. According to Saragoza, "the *chuco* in his socioeconomic circumstances could not afford to hide, so he took refuge in dependent relations such as gangs,"\(^{29}\) with all their attendant posturing and emphasis on masculine prowess.

Moore, et al.\(^{30}\) argue that Chicano gangs in East Los Angeles form a system. They suggest that "[T]he system is an aspect of the institutionalization of the gangs and institutionalization can develop only when there are long-standing stable slums."\(^{31}\) In other words, these gang members are trapped in a situation of marked segregation into "stable slums," an atypical gang experience according to years of research.\(^{32}\) While former gang members could escape the ghetto and the gang, the "Chicano...moves to another neighborhood in the largely segregated Chicano area of Los Angeles, where there is another long-standing gang."\(^{33}\) It is almost impossible to escape this system of poverty and its resultant gang. It is little wonder, then, that Chicano gangs strongly emphasize territoriality: claiming a *barrio* means to claim some degree of masculine power, even if it is a slum.\(^{34}\)

Similarly, Erlanger\(^{35}\) found that the Chicano gang itself, in all its toughness and its solidarity, develops from the estrangement experienced by young Chicanos from the larger society. These youth, in turn, seek affirmation from their peer group "because the peer group is the most readily available source of identity."\(^{36}\) This is echoed in Joan Moore's *Going Down to the Barrio: Homeboys and Homegirls in Change*, in which she argues that "larger economic changes" have the greatest impact on gang members' behavior, as opposed to so-called flagging values in ethnic communities.\(^{37}\) She notes:

> But gangs persist as young-adult institutions in a changed society, in which the labor market is not filling the needs of the transition from adolescence to young adulthood. It is not that they are rebels, rather that they are left out of the credentialed, ordered society.\(^{38}\)

It seems clear from the foregoing discussion that patriarchal ideology, which took root in Chicano gangs and is often referred to as *machismo*, is an exaggerated but obvious demonstration of male power which these young men are blocked from attaining legitimately. It is also interesting to note that not only are Chicano gangs acting out patriarchal ideologies but so also are African American gangs such as the Crips and the Bloods in Los Angeles, as well as other racial/ethnic gangs nationwide.
African American and Other Racial/Ethnic Groups

Martin Sanchez Jankowski’s study of gang members, Islands in the Street: Gangs and American Urban Society, ranged in area from Los Angeles to New York City to Boston and included African American, Puerto Rican, Chicano, Dominican, Jamaican, and Central American gang members. Jankowski argues that gang members are living in an urban society that increasingly labels them "sadistic" and "violent" criminals when, in fact, gang behavior is an outgrowth of crimogenic social conditions. As Sanchez Jankowski asserts,

Gang members grow up and live in communities in which the socioecon- nomic environment has produced a great deal of aggressive and violent behavior; thus a given gang member's display of aggressive traits or his involvement in violent exchanges is not necessarily pathological; rather, it is appropriate behavior in an environment whose socioeconomic conditions are pathological. 39

From her interviews with gang members in South Central Los Angeles and various camp correctional facilities, Leon Bing notes that it was the early Chicano gangs who set the pace for gangs in Los Angeles.

It was the cholo homeboy who first walked the walk and talked the talk. It was the Mexican-American pachuco who initiated the emblematic tatoos, the signing with hands, the writing of legends on walls. 40

And the Crips and Bloods emulated their peers in East Los Angeles starting in 1968 with a high school kid in Watts named Raymond Washington. The kids who joined these initial gang sets and the myriads of others that were later to accumulate came from "low income, government-subsidized housing projects." 41 In her interview with A.C. Jones, an ex-gang member who is on staff at Camp Kilpatrick (a correctional camp for juveniles in Los Angeles), Bing learns that young kids in South Central Los Angeles did not have many opportunities.
What do you think happened when that kid there first began to seek out his masculinity?... If he lived in any other community but Watts there would be legitimate ways to express those feelings. Little League. Pop Warner. But if you're a black kid living in Watts those options have been removed.

A.C. further stresses that he has not met a real gangbanger who comes from a "happy, balanced home, who's got a good opinion of himself." At the present time, the Bloods and the Crips are the largest gangs in the United States with many joining every day. These gangs offer reassurance to young men in an inner city that they did not create and within which they do not have many alternatives. They wear the color, walk the walk, and talk the talk to survive and to demonstrate that they are somebody. They are fierce warriors and have the respect and love of their homeboys. They are "down" for their set and willing to demonstrate bravery, defiance, and male strength. As one young gang member expressed it: "Anybody want to fight, we can fight. Anybody want to shoot, we can shoot. Want to kill, we can kill. Whatever. You know what I'm sayin'? Whatever." Clearly, gang members are reacting to a world which was created for them. Whether Chicano, African American, Puerto Rican, or of other racial/ethnic identities, these kids face common conditions in the inner cities of this nation. They are trying to be men with power in a world which denies them power.

**Conclusion**

It is important to understand the nature of gang delinquency if we are to make any inroads into solving the problems associated with gangs. Most of all this understanding is an important basis from which to fully understand the crimogenic conditions that produce what we refer to as the "gang." This paper attempts to link Merton's Strain Theory with gang delinquency through a discussion of success goals not already outlined in the theory. Specifically, the author expands the theory's implications by addressing the success goal of male power which clearly exists within a patriarchal American society.

Merton argues correctly that the blockage of goal aspirations will lead to innovation--crime and delinquency--to obtain societal economic success goals. However, he neglects to define specific goals, such as masculine power. Young gang members' attempts to obtain the scarce resource of masculine power, in a society that places great weight
on the same, are also blocked. They, in turn, seek to obtain this masculine power through other means, so again, they innovate. They become gangbangers who are willing to "do or die" for their color, territory, and homeboys, and live by masculine power ideologies generated and reinforced by a patriarchal American culture.

Maxine Baca Zinn acknowledges that *machismo* among Chicanos does exist. She acknowledges that "over compensatory masculinity" such as gang behavior is possibly maladaptive. However, she strongly asserts that male dominance is a universal societal characteristic and certainly an American societal characteristic. She further argues that such masculine power ideologies came into existence as a response to structural conditions--a response to stratification and exclusion of Chicanos--a case that can surely be made for other young men of color. This author would agree and would suggest that patriarchy is an American reality, that young men of color demonstrate patriarchal ideological frameworks in attempting to live up to the masculine ideal of "breadwinner" and protector, that they do so because they have bought into American patriarchy (by any name), and that they demonstrate patriarchal ideology in a violent and illegal manner because they are powerless to demonstrate it otherwise.

Masculine roles, so obviously apparent in the behavior of youthful gang members, are everywhere apparent in American society. These patriarchal roles, which emphasize masculine power in the family, the community, and the society need reassessing. Patriarchal values that stress masculine power and strength are inhibiting to the growth of men as well as women. Men and women will be truly free in our society only when men and women are both free. And this will only be possible when we break the cycle demanded by a patriarchal value system that exerts extreme pressure on males to dominate and succeed at all costs: a value system which is very much rooted in American society. As Sanchez Jankowski states:

> The United States, which often prides itself as the bastion of individualism, has produced a pure form of its own individualism: a person of staunch self-reliance and self-confidence whose directed goals match those of the greater society and whose toughness and defiant stance challenge all those who would threaten him. Ironically, in the defiant individualist gang member, American society has found it difficult to control its own creation.
Gang behavior does not and will never exist in a vacuum. The incidents in Los Angeles in recent years point to extremely pressing problems in the inner cities of this country. Until we are ready to get serious about preventing gangs from the ground up—looking at structural conditions in this society including institutional discrimination and prejudice—the scenes related in Leon Bing's *Do or Die* will be played out in other American cities where no one has taken the time to address the crucial issues.

A gang member in South Central described Los Angeles to Leon Bing in the following words: “it is a ‘black hole’--the people here just get swallowed up by it.” Bing comments that these are the words of a nineteen year old. This statement is telling because it reveals much of what is going on in our nation's cities. And only we can decide our cities' future course.

**Notes**


3 Merton, 1938, 675-678.

4 Other Strain theorists, Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin, and Albert Cohen, have also discussed deviance in relation to blocked means but have specifically dealt with juveniles. Cloward and Ohlin describe the juvenile gang member as one who must even adapt in relation to delinquent behavior—even within delinquent subcultures he is only afforded the opportunities available, and these differ. He may become involved with a criminal gang, where he learns to master the techniques and views of the adult criminal world; a conflict gang, where fighting is the method to garner respect from other gangs; or a retreatist gang, which Cloward and Ohlin limit to a discussion of a drug subculture [Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin, *Delinquency and Opportunity* (New York: Free Press, 1960/1988)]. Cohen, focused his argument on lower class males and their response to status-frustration, the inability to cope in a middle class world of middle class values; values, he argues, which differ from lower class male values. Cohen goes on to argue that the middle class values which lower class parents fail to instill in their children are ambition, responsibility, ability to delay gratification, courtesy, control of physical aggression and respect of property rights, among others. [Albert Cohen, *Delinquent Boys: The Culture of the Gang* (New York: Free Press,
While these theorists' arguments seem to lend themselves to the present discussion, they are only marginally linked to the present argument for at least two reasons. First, this paper does not deal with gang member adaptation to an illegitimate lifestyle, which is Cloward and Ohlin's major premise. Second, the author takes issue with Cohen's assertion that lower class boys are not raised to conform to middle class values. Martin Sanchez Jankowski debunks the mythology surrounding gang member pathology, laziness, lack of initiative, and poor family values, and asserts that the gang member is a direct creation of American middle class culture. Martin Sanchez Jankowski, *Islands in the Street: Gangs and American Urban Society* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), 313.


12 Martin Sanchez Jankowski.

14 Miller, 21-23.


17 Bing, 212-213.


20 Jankowski, 313.


24 Jankowski, 312-313; Zinn, 1982, 37.


27 Zinn, 1982, 40.


31 Moore, et al., 193.


33 Moore, et al., 193.


36 Erlanger, 237.


39 Jankowski, 312.

40 Bing, xiv.

41 Bing, 151.

42 Bing, 12.

43 Bing, 15.
44 Bing, 21.

45 Zinn, 1982, 41.

46 Zinn, 1982, 37.

47 Jankowski, 312.

48 Bing, xvi.