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Making Up Gangs: Looping, Labelling and the New Politics of Intelligence-led Policing

Alistair Fraser and Colin Atkinson

Abstract
The 2011 ‘summer of violent disorder’ in England cast a spotlight on the often arbitrary and uneven process through which individuals become labelled as ‘gang-members’. Based on data from two separate but concurrently conducted qualitative studies in Glasgow, Scotland, this article draws on the critical vocabularies of Bourdieu and Hacking to conceptualize this new frontier in the politics of gang policing: analysing the distinctive ‘fields’ that street-based young people and police actors inhabit; uncovering the complex chain of interactions through which individuals become labelled as ‘gang-members’; and exploring the consequences of such labelling processes.

Keywords
ethnography, gangs, intelligence, policing, sociology of knowledge

Introduction
In the aftermath of England’s ‘summer of violent disorder’ in 2011 – a series of events that also impacted upon young people north of the border in Scotland (BBC News, 2011a, 2011b) – Prime Minister David Cameron was unequivocal in apportioning blame. Informed by briefings from senior police officers, Cameron postulated that street gangs were ‘at the heart’ of the violence. However, as the dust settled, uncertainty about the nature and extent of gang involvement in the riots began to emerge. After initially claiming that as many as 28 per cent of those arrested in London were gang members, the Metropolitan Police revised this figure downwards to 19 per cent, a figure that dropped to 13 per cent countrywide (The Guardian and LSE, 2012: 21). By the time the United Kingdom (UK) Government’s policy document was published in response, the role of gangs in the riots was considerably downplayed. This process of equivocation, revision and uncertainty casts a new spotlight on the policing and political response to the ‘gang
fever’ (Hallsworth and Young, 2008) that has recently gripped the UK, in particular the role of police intelligence in attributing gang membership and estimating the extent of the ‘problem’. Given the potentially corrosive effects of labelling (McAra and McVie, 2012; Ralphs et al., 2009), there is a need for critical scrutiny of the processes through which individuals become labelled as gang members, and the consequences of such labelling.

Based on original research undertaken in Glasgow, Scotland, this article aims to explore the complex chain of interactions through which individuals become labelled as gang members, and the consequences of these often uncertain and unpredictable processes. Specifically, the article illuminates the increasingly active role of civilian intelligence workers – who are employed in the police service but are not sworn police officers – in the new politics of gang policing. Civilian intelligence workers play a pivotal role in the identification of gang members and the construction of gangs ‘in the system’, exercising a level of power and discretion previously only attributed to police officers. The role of civilian policing staff, however, remains relatively unexplored in the academic literature, and little is known of their subcultural role within the broader field of policing, which is still dominated by a persistent and hegemonic ‘cop culture’. Drawing on first-hand accounts of police actors – both civilian intelligence workers and police officers in a range of roles – and young people themselves, we analyse the contingent meanings of gangs in the varying contexts of ‘policing’ and ‘street’. In both fields, there is a struggle for recognition, status and distinction – and for young people, a great deal of posturing, experimentation and fluidity – making the attribution of gang membership a highly fraught and contingent process, with clear potential for error and ‘misrecognition’.

The article is divided into three parts. In the first, we give an overview of the rapid expansion of the policing of gangs in the UK, highlighting the increasingly critical role of civilian intelligence workers in these processes. Drawing on the vocabularies of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, we argue for the need to appreciate the divergent understandings of gangs between the fields of policing and the street, as well as the potential pitfalls involved in ‘making up people’ (Hacking, 2004) – particularly when carried out by police actors obscured from public debate and academic scrutiny. In the second, we introduce the field site and methods of the research, framing the argument as a dialogue between researchers embedded in distinct but related fields. In the third, we explore the separate but overlapping nature of gang meanings and definitions between these fields, demonstrating the role of subjectivity and contingency in labelling processes, and the impact of these at-times arbitrary processes on the lives of children and young people.

**Policing Gangs in the UK: Power, Politics and Policy Transfer**

Prime Minister Cameron’s declaration of a ‘concerted, all-out war on gangs and gang culture’ (HM Government, 2011a) marked a significant amplification of government rhetoric toward gangs in the UK, and was followed by a corresponding acceleration of gang-specific policy responses (HM Government, 2011b); many of which have a distinctly American flavour. Summarizing the impact of such developments in England, Smithson et al. (2013: 114) recognize the importance of policy transfer from the United States (US), noting that many English cities have developed dedicated police gang/firearm units, such
as Trident in London, Matrix in Liverpool, Xcalibre in Manchester and Stealth in Nottingham. These developments signal a clear shift towards US-style understanding of gangs and the methods by which they should be policed. While there is a growing critical mass of knowledge on the landscape of gang meanings and motivations in the UK (Densley, 2013; Goldson, 2011; Hallsworth, 2013; Pitts, 2008), this has not as yet been matched by critical discourse on emergent criminal justice interventions.

As the confusion relating to the nature and extent of gang involvement in the riots makes clear, the definition of gangs and attribution of gang membership is far from clear-cut. Indeed, the history of academic gang research is beset with debate as to the correct classification and definition of the term ‘gang’. The most comprehensive effort at classification (Miller, 1975) – involving a wide range of youth workers, criminal justice agents and self-identifying gang members – had some 1400 features suggested (Ball and Curry, 1995: 228). As a result, Katz and Jackson-Jacobs have described academic debate over gang definitions as ‘essentially an argument over the correct description of a ghost’ (Katz and Jackson-Jacobs, 2004: 106) – an argument over an invisible symbol, on to which our worst fears and prejudices are projected. As Hobbs notes, moreover, these definitional debates are often overlaid with political considerations and the need to attract funding in difficult financial times: ‘the harder researchers look, the bigger the gang problem becomes’ (Hobbs, 1997; see also Hagedorn, 2008). Crucially, therefore, the logic of gang definition may vary widely between street-based understandings, definitions used in policing contexts, and those developed within academic discourse.

In this landscape of power, language, and contested meaning, the conceptual vocabulary of Pierre Bourdieu offers a helpful point of entry, in particular through the concept of field, which forms part of Bourdieu’s celebrated triumvirate of habitus, field and capital. For Bourdieu, the social world is composed of several overlapping fields of play, which can be understood, in simple terms, as the spheres of activity that we enter into in our daily life. Examples from Bourdieu’s writing include the academic, scientific, economic, and educational fields, as well as the field of cultural production (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Each sphere of activity is composed of its own independent logic, rules, linguistic practices, hierarchy and system of social relations that structure the experience of actors within it (Jenkins, 2002: 85). In this sense, field also functions as a metaphor for the force of these relations of power; a gravitational ‘field’ similar to that exerted by planets. Crucially, too, each field may have further ‘sub-fields’ nested within, like Russian dolls. These sub-fields may remain umbilically linked to – and maintain some characteristics of – the broader field, whilst retaining elements of distinctiveness. Both the field of ‘policing’ and the ‘street’ can be usefully understood through Bourdieu’s conceptual apparatus.

Individuals are socialized into the rules, logics, and hierarchies of these separate but overlapping fields in a process of habituation, whereby codes and rules are deeply internalized and normalized; becoming experienced as a ‘second skin’ of recognition and feel. This preconscious embodiment of field logic is what Bourdieu refers to as habitus – the hinterland of history, biography and culture imprinted on the body through processes of socialization. Individuals with common field positions and experiences will also, therefore, share key traits, values and cultural dispositions, as well as a common language. If
‘policing’ and ‘street’ can be conceptualized as overlapping but largely independent fields of play – each operating with their separate logics, rules, patterns and discourses – then the actors within these worlds can be envisaged as socialized into different dispositions, characteristics and shared understandings. In these divergent contexts, the term ‘gang’ brings with it a set of cultural meanings that are also separate but overlapping. As White (2008) argues:

A major reason why ‘gangs’ as such cannot be easily profiled is because of the complexities of social belonging and social identity pertaining to how young people live their lives […] young people have multiple identifications, and can be simultaneously gang members and non-gang members […] It is the multilayered nature and dynamics of youth associations and affiliations that make a gang-targeting exercise difficult and problematic. (White 2008: 149)

For young people on the street, the ‘gang’ might represent the territorial belonging, community and identity of a group of friends. For police officers the ‘gang’ may represent the risk, harm and violence of criminals. For civilian intelligence analysts, embedded in the sub-field of police intelligence work, the ‘gang’ may represent an abstract entity, comprised of records from a database understood through the lens of a given definition. The points of connection between these divergent understandings are indicative of the fragile and tensile interactions that compose contemporary gang labelling practices, yet one that can have real and lasting consequences for young people. As Jacobs notes:

Recording gang affiliation in an intelligence database is controversial because intelligence databases are constructed by police agencies on the basis of what might be limited, ambiguous, or even mistaken information. But even gang databases created by prosecutors and by jail and prisons officials are vulnerable to error, because a decision about whether a particular individual is a gang member (and whether a particular group of individuals constitutes a gang) often requires discretionary judgment. Moreover, even if a person is accurately identified as a ‘gang member’, the meaning and significance of such membership varies greatly from individual to individual. (Jacobs 2009: 706).

In the US, one of the architects of the Cincinnati Initiative to Reduce Violence lists the potential consequences of labelling young people as gang members: ‘undeserved law-enforcement attention … statutory sentencing enhancements … segregation in jail and prison, as well as causing a host of other consequences’ (Kennedy, 2009: 711). In the UK, Ralphs et al. have argued that similar systems have ‘slipped unquestioned into main-stream policy and practice’, with important consequences for gang labelling processes (Ralphs et al., 2009: 485). They continue:

Being labelled as a gang member or associate created a greater vulnerability to police attention and surveillance. Armed police raids on family homes in search for firearms were common and brought stigma, stress and feelings of violation to the families involved. Young people living in these areas and labelled as ‘gang associates’ were often subjected to police checks and exclusion from community events including carnivals and family fun days. (Ralphs et al., 2009: 491)
In this climate, the attribution of gang membership is fraught with complexity and holds the potential for corrosive consequences to the life chances of young people. Such efforts are, moreover, indicative of the pivotal role of civilian intelligence analysts – hitherto a largely unexplored subculture of contemporary policing (Cope, 2004) – in processes of identifying gangs and gang members. The research that informs this article seeks to uncover both the complex processes of attribution of gang membership in policing – the official construction of gangs – and how these labels are actively interpreted and contested by young people. This was achieved by developing an innovative research method-olgy that brought together two researchers and field sites – between policing and the street – to provide an understanding of people and ‘gangs’ in Glasgow, Scotland.

Methodology: Between Policing and the Street

The city of Glasgow has a long-standing reputation for violence, youth disorder, and gang behaviour. Territorial groups of violent young people – referred to as gangs – have been reported in Glasgow since the 1880s (Patrick, 1973: 123), and have been a recurring feature of media reportage, popular fiction, television documentaries, and film-making in and on the city since this time. At varying points in this history, these groups have become the targeted focus of law-enforcement. Most famous in this context, perhaps, is the inter-war period when the Chief Constable of the City of Glasgow Police, Percy Sillitoe, developed his reputation as the ‘hammer of the gangs’ following his crackdown on street gangs (see Davies, 2013; Sillitoe, 1956: 139–152). However, the late 1960s also saw a formidable policing response to gangs in the peripheral housing estate of Easterhouse (Bartie, 2010), leading to a well-publicized visit to the area by the then-popular entertainer Frankie Vaughan. More recently, the gang initiative piloted in Glasgow by Scotland’s Violence Reduction Unit has achieved international recognition, and has formed a key strut in UK Government policy responses.

This article draws on two separate but overlapping ethnographic studies conducted over a similar time frame in an urban community in Glasgow, called Langview (a pseudo-onym); a deindustrialized working-class community in the inner-city of Glasgow. As Glasgow’s economy has reconfigured around the service sector, so the former manufacturing bases in Langview have been reconstituted. The factories have been converted into chic artists’ spaces or outsourced call-centres, or flattened to make way for gentrified flat developments. Nonetheless, the area remains defined by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation as being within the 5 per cent ‘most deprived’ areas in Scotland, having rates of unemployment and benefit claimants well above the national average. Langview also has an established reputation, in the city, its media and its police service, as being an area with a ‘gang problem’. The first study (2006–2009) explored the understandings, experiences, and meanings of ‘gang’ behaviour for children and young people in Langview (Fraser, 2010a). The data in this article is drawn principally from a series of discussion groups with different groups of young people in the area, and field notes from periods of participant-observation.

The second of these studies (2008–2013) explored cultural reproduction, persistence and change in Scottish policing, with a specific focus on the practices of intelligence-led policing.
(Atkinson, 2013). During the early stages of this research (in 2009, concurrent with the first study), a period of qualitative research was undertaken on the intelligence-led policing of young people and gangs in Langview. The study consisted of a six-week period of participant observation with a range of police personnel responsible for tackling gang violence in the police division incorporating Langview, and deepened through the undertaking of 16 semi-structured interviews with both police officers and civilian police staff engaged in the policing of young people in the area. One interviewee in this police study identified Langview as an area with levels of deprivation, alcohol abuse, and violent crime involving youth that were greater than those recorded in other neighbourhoods in Glasgow. Another interviewee recalled that whilst Langview had ‘good people’ it was also ‘rough as fuck’, where ‘junkies would shout at you’ and ‘you wouldn’’t feel safe’. Uniquely, this study uncovered how civilian intelligence analysts – as office-based, young, predominantly female and embodying a new ‘aca-dem’ knowledge that is divorced from experience – have become increasingly essential to the effective functioning of intelligence-led policing of young people and ‘gangs’.

**Gangs on the Street, Gangs in the System**

During the period of fieldwork, Strathclyde Police was piloting the Community Initiative to Reduce Violence (CIRV), in which gang members – as identified through police intelligence – were invited to participate in a series of ‘call-ins’ at the High Court in Glasgow. These sessions consist of a programme of motivational talks and emotional entreaties from ex-gang members, facial trauma surgeons, family members of victims, and police representatives. At these sessions individuals are offered a ‘no-violence’ contract in return for access to the CIRV team – composed of a range of police, health, social work, and education workers offering professional advice and support. The criterion for access to this range of services was, during this pilot period, that the individual has an intelligence marker in the police database for gang membership. If an individual wished access to these services and did not have this marker, they had to make a declaration to a police officer that they were a member of a gang. In these early stages, therefore, the project was almost entirely reliant on the accuracy, rigour and consistency of police intelligence markers for gang membership. Street-based fieldwork disclosed, however, that the ‘gang lists’ composed by the police were often inaccurate, inconsistent and out-of-date. One community worker, who had been privy to the ‘gang lists’ for their area, noted that the list included a range of individuals who had never been involved in any form of territorial violence, while missing many more who had.

This disjuncture between community-based and policing-oriented definitions of gang membership casts a spotlight on the hitherto ‘hidden’ role of civilian intelligence analysts in the new politics of gang policing. In the following section, we analyse the complex and contingent processes through which attribution of gang membership is achieved, looking particularly at the subcultural dynamics involved in the construction of gangs ‘in the system’.

**Policing subcultures: From ‘cop culture’ to intelligence-led policing**

Academic research has persistently highlighted the gap between ideal representations of the police service and the lived reality and common understandings of police work.
Previous research has, for example, revealed violence (Westley, 1953), corruption (Punch, 1985), racism (Holdaway, 1994) and sexism (Reiner, 2010) in what is elsewhere portrayed as a heroic organization defending society from anarchy; the thin blue line between order and chaos. Contrary to both these clear distinctions and official constructions of gangs as definitionally ‘problematic’, some within the police service recognize that the distinction between the police and gangs – between order and chaos – is not always clear. During fieldwork a sergeant reflected on his time as a probationer, under the tutelage of an older, experienced cop. The sergeant recalled:

It’s no’ nice tae say it, but we were the biggest gang in Glasgow. It’s no’ nice tae say it, but that’s what we wur. (PO6)

This self-identification of police officers as part of a gang is perhaps unsurprising, given the tendency within the literature on cop culture to highlight the core characteristics, amongst others, of action, machismo, solidarity and isolation (Reiner, 2010: 118–132). However, the police workforce is broader than simply that of police officers; civilian police staff are active in many roles, with some roles directly impinging upon the policing of young people and gangs. Moreover, civilian intelligence analysts represent, in important ways, the antithesis of cop culture: they are office-based not street-based, young and ‘inexperienced’, and, unlike police officers, are predominantly female. Additionally, these civilian intelligence analysts embody an academic knowledge that is not traditionally valued in cop culture. During fieldwork civilian intelligence analysts, who had degrees as varied as history, law, psychology, philosophy and politics, were made to feel that their academic skills and talents mattered little ‘oan the job’. Understood as such, civilian intelligence analysts – with unique forms of capital in a reconfiguring sub-field – present a challenge to the established habitus of police officers. The processes through which gang membership is attributed in police systems occur within this broader context of contestation in the sub-field of police intelligence work; analysts are thus doubly insulated – culturally and institutionally – from the street-based realities to which their work relates.

Intelligence-led policing, implemented in the early-2000s, has become a key feature of policing in the UK. The rise of the intelligence-led policing paradigm has, at least in theory, necessitated an important cultural shift in police work. As Waddington states:

One of the most alluring aspirations of the past few years has been ‘intelligence-led’ policing. Instead of policing by ‘hunch’ and ‘prejudice’, police now aspire to be guided by the use of intelligence, so that interventions are directed only at those for whom it is merited. (Waddington, 2007: 130)

This shift from ‘hunch and prejudice’ to the professional use of intelligence to target police activity has occurred in parallel with the civilianization of key roles in the sub-field of police intelligence work, and particularly the introduction of the civilian intelligence analyst. Nonetheless, despite the rhetoric of structure, standardization and professionalization, the exercise of discretion – a uniquely individual disposition – remains a key aspect of police intelligence work. This is a particularly interesting development given the relative cultural distance between office-based civilian intelligence analysts and their
police officer counterparts ‘on the shift’, the latter of whom are most frequently implicated in the exercise of police discretion.

The adoption of an intelligence-led approach to the policing of gangs systematizes and compartmentalizes knowledge production in the police service. Creating gangs ‘in the system’ requires the use of information produced through the intelligence cycle: a recurrent process of direction, collection, collation, evaluation, analysis, dissemination and back to direction. All of these stages, with the exception of one, are undertaken by police officers; only the analysis stage is civilianized in Scottish policing. This is critical because the analysis stage is where value is added to police information; it is here where intelligence should provide ‘the edge for law enforcement’ (Heldon, 2009: 124). However, as has been identified by other scholars, the system has been hampered by struggles to define the field of appropriate knowledge for defining and responding to gangs. As Brodeur and Dupont note:

In ILP [intelligence-led policing], police management proactively determines, on the basis of ‘objective’ analyses conducted within the organization, how resources should be deployed…. This top down model meets great resistance from police field officers, whose occupational culture has little room for civilian analysts setting the priorities from above. (Brodeur and Dupont, 2008: 18)

Fieldwork disclosed how the promise of an objective assessment of interventions is inhibited by the persistence of a cop culture that privileges the experiential knowledge that the ‘crime-fighting’, masculine cop has gained from policing ‘the streets’. As Ratcliffe notes in his own research, this conflict emerges as a result of attempts to ‘synchronize two different types of knowledge (old and new) that are, on the surface, fairly mismatched’ (Ratcliffe, 2008: 217). This has resulted in the persistent targeting of interventions against the ‘usual suspects’ – invariably the types of young people traditionally regarded as ‘police property’ (Reiner, 1992: 48). Civilian intelligence analysts have found this cultural outlook difficult to subvert or replace. For one intelligence analyst:

But yeah, it is the same offenders. And we pick up on it every day, because we have our daily meeting that looks at basically criminality over the past 24 hours and basically you just sit there and look around the room and say ‘him again’ and make sure that if it is somebody that is coming up time and time again that they’re treated as persistent offenders and targeted as such. (IA3)

The introduction of the civilian intelligence analyst in Scottish policing has had limited success in mitigating or transforming an existing arrest mentality. This presence of the civilian intelligence analyst has been welcomed by police officers, especially given the failure of analysts to redefine the conditions of the sub-field. As one police inspector reflected, when considering the relationship between his unit charged with tackling gang violence and an intelligence analyst responsible for the provision of analytical support:

It’s been a very positive relationship… [the civilian intelligence analyst has] come up with indicators and charts that have provided us with the knowledge to go onto any area of this
force... and we’ve already got a head start. We already know who we’re looking for and what we’re looking for and we know where to find them. So it’s been very, very positive. (PO1)

From a Bourdieusian perspective, although the field of policing, and particularly the sub-field of police intelligence work, has been challenged by the introduction of new police actors, the conditions of the sub-field – including its power dynamics, hierarchies, privileged forms of capital and habitus – have remained broadly consistent with what had come before. As such, while ‘intelligence-led’ policing might have heralded a new sensibility in the policing of gangs, the subordinate position of civilian intelligence workers has not had the direct impact that might have been predicted. Instead, the situation appears to be both complex and contested by subcultural dynamics and struggles for recognition, resulting in unforeseen consequences for labelling practices, and young people themselves.

Street habitus, gang identity and social meaning

Much like the field of policing, attributions of gang identity at a street level were contested and contingent, involving aspects of self-presentation and self-aggrandisement. In the following discussion, Julie and Pamela highlight the fact that friendship, loyalty and neighbourhood are central to their understandings of gangs:

AF: What do you understand a gang to be?
Julie: Jist pals really. It is. Jist people that stay in the same scheme [housing estate] that talk.
Pamela: An that back each other up.

For the young men involved in the study, moreover, gang identity played a number of important roles during different stages of social development. Very young children, for example, integrated ‘Langview Young Team’ – the gang identity synonymous with the area – into play behaviour. In the following group discussion, Mark, Gary, and Willie talk about watching gang-fights over the bridge when they were much younger:

Mark: Aye we wur talking aboot this last night. We used tae always go tae the bridge, when we were pure young, we used tae always kid oan we were fighting wi’ the Swigton.
AF: The bridge at the LYP?
Mark: Aye. Every time aw the big wans used tae fight wi’ the Swigton…. 
Gary: We used tae pure stand at the back, fling bricks an aw that.
Mark: We used tae run down tae half-way, then run back up as if we’d done something.
AF: Did you like sitting watching the fight?
Gary: Aye.
AF: Why?
Willie: Entertainment.
Gary: It wis jist pure funny, everyone’s pure shoutin at each other, pure callin each other this and that, an we were pure jist sitting watching.
The boys’ involvement in these fights, crucially, was as an extension of play behaviour – showing why gang-fights might be described as being ‘simply a game of chases like Cowboys and Indians with gang names used’ (Kintrea et al., 2008). As young people in the study got older, however, the meanings associated with gang identities also developed and altered. For young men in their early teens, gang identities were drawn on as a means of demarcating territorial identity, an expression of a deep-seated attachment between space and self that has been described as *street habitus* (Fraser, 2013). In the context of limited resources for leisure and activity, space itself – and, arguably, body capital and verbal aptitude – becomes a resource to be drawn on in carving out distinction and identity. Local places and spaces, bound up with individual and collective memory, become fused with self-identity, and the family, friendships and relationships which occur there.

In this context, the enactment of gang identity – through spraying gang graffiti at the boundaries of areas, or participating in the fringes of conflicts – can represent ‘a liminal space for neighbourhood youths to experiment and play with gang symbolism and traditions without a full commitment’ (Conquergood, 1994: 37), and a means of expressing the lived experience of limited socio-spatial autonomy in the postindustrial city (see Fraser, 2013). Looking at a picture of a gang tag drawn one of the research participants, for example, Daz and Alan describe the significance of the tag:

AF: Why did you write your name on it then?
Alan: Everybody else did, so might as well.
AF: Why did you put LYT1 after it?
Daz: Because. Everybody fae Langview does it.
Alan: Because it means a lot tae me.

For some young people involved in the study, gang identity therefore played a number of non-violent and non-criminal roles – relating to contests for distinction, at both an individual and community level, within the context of the ‘street’. For these young people, ‘the gang’ represented the symbolic means of evincing community loyalty and subcultural approval in the context of limited resources. Nonetheless, the markers of this communitas are polysemous – they can be read and interpreted very differently by different groups.

These observations demonstrate some of the divergent logics of gang definition at street-level – with the meanings attached to gangs varying considerably, and clear difficulties identified in attributing ‘membership’. As such, it might be concluded that the most concrete evidence of gang membership is participation in territorial violence. However, as Liam described below, it is by no means straightforward for police to catch what are often fleeting conflicts *in situ*:

Liam: Every weekend.
AF: An are the polis out every weekend after folk?
Liam: There’s always polis about. Up an doon the road an that, up the park. But they nivir catch anyb’dae, cos they aw wear big red jaickets. When everyb’dae’s fighting, someone’ll jist shout ‘edgy’ [danger] and everyb’dae jist runs.
From these comments, it is clear that gang identification – for young people in Langview – is situational, contingent and age-graded, denoting a far more fluid and fleeting understanding of gang ‘membership’ than can be captured by gang intelligence systems. In the following section, drawing on the work of Ian Hacking, we discuss some of the potential consequences of the labelling effects of these processes.

Making up gangs: Looping, labelling and legitimacy

Discussion of the human impact of systemic labelling calls forward the work of philosopher Ian Hacking, in particular his work on the interaction of processes of categorization with processes of disciplinary control. For Hacking (2004), Foucault’s macro-level archaeology of control and order – in factories, prisons, and hospitals – dovetails neatly with Goffman’s micro-level insights into the interaction between disciplinary systems and everyday lived experience. Drawing together Foucault’s analysis of the emergence of psychological illness as an appropriate object for state control with the experience of subjects interacting with – and embodying – those discursive strategies, Hacking composes an original theory of what he terms ‘human kinds’. For Hacking, people (or groups, or syndromes) do not exist as subjects until they are named and therefore classified – at which point the classification takes on a life independent of its origins, a ‘looping effect’, and it is possible to speak of ‘interactions between classifications of people and the people classified’ (Hacking, 2004: 279):

The use of these categories often has real effects upon people. Not necessarily direct effects, related to the mere knowledge that the authorities or experts classify you in a certain way. The effect can be indirect, when the classifications are incorporated into the rules of institutions, for example prisons. Few criminals know the elaborate theories and structures of criminological classification. (Hacking, 2004: 297)

One of the larger dangers of this process of categorization, therefore, involves the ‘loop-ing effects’ discussed by Hacking. At a micro-level, the divergent fields occupied by street-based youth and police intelligence workers facilitate misrecognition, and ‘gang’ categorization may therefore be wrongly attributed, out-of-date, or based on misinformation. At a macro-level, in the context of broader shifts toward risk-management and actuarial justice (Feeley and Simon, 1992; O’Malley, 2001), there are signs that the ‘gang’ is becoming an increasingly potent lens through which social policy is directed. As such, systemic attribution of ‘gang membership’ has the potential to engender ‘looping effects’ that fall within this margin for error. In common with the critical risk literature, ‘govern-ing through gangs’ represents a contemporary technique of classification and manage-ment of potentially dangerous populations, with the potential to take on a ‘life of its own’:

The more the abstract system of specialized knowledge becomes embedded in communication formats and technologies, the more it takes on a life of its own. As it deskills, it also produces alienating and fragmenting effects on the occupational culture and the self. (Ericson and Haggerty, 1997: 38)
In this context, there is a need to illuminate the micro-level processes through which such attributions occur, and highlight the potentially corrosive effects of this process on a macro-level.

Civilian intelligence analysts in Langview drew upon a range of available information sources to produce detailed assessments of gangs, gang members and their activities. Intelligence was obtained primarily through the use of computer databases – such as the Scottish Intelligence Database – which are populated with some information (but not all information) obtained by police officers during the course of their routine activities. Such databases may also include intelligence obtained covertly, including information from informants. This intelligence was used by civilian intelligence analysts to guide both enforcement activity and the referral of gang members for multi-agency interventions. Beyond such ‘traditional’ intelligence sources intelligence analysts have also become active in obtaining intelligence on young people, gangs and gang members through ‘open sources’. This is mostly achieved through using information from the profiles of ‘gang members’ on social networking websites. Young people have been quick to capitalize upon the possibilities and opportunities of new technologies – particularly mobile phones and social networking websites – to communicate in new social spaces. As Daz mentions:

Daz: See all the casuals [football hooligans]? Ah’ve goat them oan ma Bebo [social networking site]. Aw the fitbaw casuals.
AF: What, you’ve got them as you’re friends?
Daz: Ah’ve everybody. Casuals. Aw them.

Despite the evident extension of processes of self-presentation and imagined selfhood into their online lives, police actors have increasingly used these images, videos and information to construct young people as gang members, resulting in robust enforcement activities, such as ‘early morning raids’ of suspected gang members. As one police officer stated:

We actually know who’s doing what and who’s there for whatever reason because they’re actually organising stuff through the Bebo sites, and Myspace and ProfileHeaven where they’ve organised what they are going to do, so it’s the intelligence-led policing side of it. (PO1)

Once identified as gang members by civilian intelligence analysts, young people were represented as such through the creation of charts and maps using specialized computer software, the results of which were often printed off for police officers to use in directing operational activity. These charts depicted gang members as small icons or avatars, grouped together in boxes (representing gangs) with lines (or ‘links’) representing associations or rivalries between gang members and across gangs. The maps created by the intelligence analysts provided a visual representation of official understandings of the territoriality of gangs. Through these activities civilian intelligence analysts have become powerful actors in the processes of labelling gang members. As one intelligence analyst commented:
The cops most of the time tend to put this information into the [intelligence] database and then we use our judgement maybe to put them in [a gang] or not. (IA4)

In exercising this level of professional discretion, a cultural characteristic previously only attributed in the academic literature on policing to police officers, the civilian intelligence analysts disclosed a critical role in influencing the life chances of the young people who become increasingly subject to police attention.

The creation of such analytical products, however, is fraught with difficulty. Whilst the discretion of the intelligence analyst provides an important new ‘edge’ for law enforcement, it is also a potential point of failure in the intelligence cycle; a police officer also commented that ‘the system is only as good as those that feed into it’.17 Observational fieldwork demonstrated the challenges of ensuring that the intelligence analysis used to guide and direct operational police activity was up-to-date and accurate. This is especially important given evidence from earlier research elsewhere of the ‘fluid nature’ of social identity and the ambiguities of gang formation (White, 2008). During fieldwork a civilian intelligence analyst (IA6) commented on the importance of the ‘currency’ of intelligence; that is to say, gang-related intelligence collected on an individual collected, in this instance, in the preceding 24 months. For another, however, the throughput of intelligence was oftentimes messy and arbitrary:

[It is] important that we categorise everyone into gangs and know who’s got an affiliation with who…. So it’s trying to determine, you know, do you wanna clog up an intelligence system full of associations of pals that just hang about the street together or do we want to know about people who are ring leaders in gangs or who regularly cause trouble, fight on street corners etcetera? (IA3)

There were no clear answers to this conundrum. The bureaucracy of the intelligence cycle, as well as the partial uptake and understanding of intelligence-led policing in the wider field of policing, inhibited the effectiveness of bridging ‘gangs in the system’ with ‘gangs on the street’. These difficulties are not unique to Scotland, and are aptly illustrated by Ralphs et al.’s description of a teenager in an English city who had no gang connections other than through family members:

… despite his denial and demands made to police to see the intelligence that led to this label, the association remained and … a few months before his final exams, his school was informed by the police that he was a gang member, although they were unable to specify which gang due to insufficient evidence. Although never arrested for any offence or known to be involved in gang conflict in his school, he was temporarily suspended. The police evidence for this association was requested by his family but, at this stage, was not forthcoming. (Ralphs et al., 2009: 494)

Conclusion

It is clear that the traditional understanding of conflict between the police and young people, at the micro-level, over-emphasizes the discretion – and power – of the individual police officer. Additionally, at the macro-level, existing accounts fail to both uncover and
disaggregate the complex chain of interactions in the field of policing, and the diverse range of actors involved. Whilst some police officers will invariably engage young people on the street, in many ways their decision to engage was already predetermined in other fields; through an intelligence system that categorizes, groups, and targets – and consequently labels – young people based on a range of information flows that fail to capture the fluidity of young people’s own identities. Policing youth in Glasgow relies upon bridging the gap between two fields – system and street – that operate with unique logics and divergent speeds, and are comprised by different actors with exclusive habitus – or world views – that can limit the extent of mutual understanding. Our analysis has demonstrated the need for new vocabularies and conceptual lenses with which to articulate these contemporary processes – to reconfigure traditional conceptualisations of ‘labelling’ in an increasingly data-driven social world, in which individuals are abstracted, virtualized, looped and ‘reassembled’ as ‘data-doubles’ (Haggerty and Ericson, 2000). It has also demonstrated the need to refresh our methodological lenses, emphasizing the need to understand the connections between apparently separate – but in reality closely inter-related – fields of knowledge and understanding.

As we have argued in this article, there is a pressing need to open up these technicist and bureaucratic processes to critical and empirical scrutiny: on a practical level, to prevent the mislabelling and ‘misrecognition’ of youth with a pejorative term with unforesee-able consequences; on a political level, to demonstrate the deleterious future consequences of ‘governing through gangs’, when the meaning of the term is so fluid, context-specific and laden with potentially corrosive labelling effects; and on a conceptual level, to demonstrate the impact of both the technology and discourse of ‘intelligence-led’ policing on the dispositions of police actors, and the need to hone new theoretical lenses to comprehend these new co-dependency of agency, networks and systemic knowledge (Latour, 2005). As Ferrell et al. note:

… the everyday actions of criminals, police officers, and judges offer not just insights into criminal justice, but important glimpses into the very process by which social life is constructed and reconstructed… this subject matter in turn reveals the complex, contested dynamic between cultures of control (control agencies’ downwards symbolic constructions) and cultures of deviance (rule breakers’ upwards counter-constructions). (Ferrell et al., 2008: 5)

In a post-Snowden era characterized by a critical backlash toward surveillance practices and technologies – and the serious implications for personal data and the consequences for those surveilled – this form of cultural knowledge and critique is evermore necessary.

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Notes

1. The final figures quoted in the report were 20 per cent for London and 10 per cent or less for the rest of the country (HM Government, 2011: 3), though this may reflect the considerable variations in operational definitions in different policing jurisdictions (see Cottrell-Boyce, 2013).

2. Seventy-five per cent of public thought gangs were a major cause of riots (The Guardian and LSE, 2012: 11).

3. The term ‘police actors’ is used to extend the traditional view of policing beyond sworn police officers, indicating the agency of civilian police staff in the modern police service.

4. For a cogent critique of this policy document, see Cottrell-Boyce (2013).

5. Katz and Webb (2006: 206) note that, as violence associated with gangs increased in the 1970s, there has been a steady consolidation of gang policing within specialized taskforces.

6. A self-formed association of peers, bound together by mutual interests, with identifiable leadership, well-developed lines of authority, and other organizational features, who act in concert to achieve a specific purpose or purposes which generally include the conduct of illegal activity and control over a particular territory, facility, or type of enterprise (Miller, 1975: 121).

7. For a current overview of debate on definitions of gangs in the UK, see Cottrell-Boyce (2013) and Goldson (2011).


9. On portrayals in the 1930s, see Davies (2013); on the 1960s, see Bartie (2010). For a history of cultural representations of Glasgow as a ‘violent city’, see Fraser (2010b).

10. Both studies gained formal ethical approval from both the relevant institutions (respectively, Langview Youth Project and Strathclyde Police) and the University of Glasgow Board of Ethics. All participants’ comments are anonymized.


12. For a further description of one such ‘call-in’, see Donnelly and Tombs (2008).

13. David Cameron has stated that learning from these policies would form part of the ‘national priority’ of action in relation to youth gang violence. See Herald Scotland (2011).

14. This criterion was subsequently altered to focus on commission of violent offences over gang membership.

15. Understanding the police service as a gang is not limited to the police officers. Many of the respondents in the Reading the Riots study who lived ‘in opposite ends of the country’ used versions of the same phrase to describe the force: they are ‘the biggest gang out there’ (The Guardian and LSE, 2012: 18).

16. Currently, 63 per cent of the police staff workforce is female, compared to only 28 per cent of the police officer workforce (Police Scotland, 2013: 46).

17. Elsewhere in fieldwork this was summarized by those involved in the sub-field of police intelligence work as ‘shite in, shite out’.
References


