



Comment on Lerman's "Gangs, Networks, and Subcultural Delinquency"

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COMMENTARY AND DEBATE

Comment on Lerman's "Gangs, Networks, and Subcultural Delinquency"¹

While the distinction between social and cultural aspects of human association and their behavioral consequences is a matter of elementary concern to the behavior sciences, Paul Lerman quite correctly takes many of us to task for not sufficiently recognizing this distinction in our research.² It is clear that not all delinquency which is subcultural takes place within groups known as "gangs," and the carriers of particular subcultures vary greatly in the nature of their associations with one another.³ The Sherifs have rejected the concept of the gang as in any sense scientifically adequate; Yablonsky finds it necessary to coin a new concept—the "near-group"—to describe certain "violent gangs"; and others of us have used the term in a common-sense way, while finding wanting many common-sense assumptions concerning the nature of groups so labeled.⁴ But the distinctions employed by Lerman have not been systematically applied, either conceptually or empirically, and this is an important contribution of his paper.

Before accepting Lerman's thesis that "the pair or triad, not the group or gang, is the social unit most frequently used by subcultural boys in their deviance," however, both conceptual and methodological

questions need to be raised. On a conceptual level, subgrouping within larger groups (or gangs) has often been noted. Gannon, for example, notes that "almost all of the [New York Youth Board] workers . . . reported that the distinction between 'core' and 'peripheral' membership was still valid for their groups, and most indicated that the groups have splintered into smaller cliques numbering anywhere from three to fifteen members."⁵ Jansyn's research suggests important processes within the group and external to it which were related to subgrouping within the gang he studied.⁶ In addition, it should be noted that delinquent episodes may or may not be related to boys' "usual" patterns of association. Responses to an interviewer's

⁴ Muzafer Sherif and Carolyn W. Sherif, *Reference Groups: Exploration into Conformity and Deviation of Adolescents* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964); Lewis Yablonsky, *The Violent Gang* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1962); and James F. Short, Jr., and Fred L. Strodbeck, *Group Process and Gang Delinquency* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965). See also James F. Short, Jr., "Social Structure and Group Processes in Explanations of Gang Delinquency," in Muzafer Sherif and Carolyn Sherif (eds.), *Problems of Youth: Transition to Adulthood in a Changing World* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1965).

⁵ Thomas M. Gannon, "Dimensions of Current Gang Delinquency," *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, IV, No. 1 (January, 1967), 119–31.

⁶ Jansyn, *op. cit.*; for other examples, see the "status threat" hypothesis and matters related to exchange processes discussed in Short and Strodbeck, *op. cit.*; also, Hans W. Mattick and Nathan S. Caplan, "Stake Animals, Loud Talking, and Leadership in Do-Nothing and Do-Something Situations," in Malcolm Klein and Barbara Myerhoff (eds.), *Juvenile Gangs in Context: Theory, Research, and Action* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965).

¹ Paul Lerman, "Gangs, Networks, and Subcultural Delinquency," *American Journal of Sociology*, LXXIII, No. 1 (July, 1967), 63–72.

² The distinction is made explicit in my Introduction to the abridged edition of Frederic M. Thrasher's *The Gang* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), pp. xxxiv ff.

³ See, e.g., Albert J. Reiss, Jr., "The Social Integration of Queers and Peers," *Social Problems* (Fall, 1961), pp. 102–20; and Leon Jansyn, "Solidarity and Delinquency in a Street Corner Group," *American Sociological Review*, XXXI (October, 1966), 600–614.

query concerning whom one usually goes around with do not, of course, tap the processes which determine those subgroupings and their related behaviors. But this is another problem and not a criticism of the paper under review.

One may question the efficacy of the survey technique in seeking information which is to be utilized for attacking the theoretical issues toward which Lerman's paper is directed. While we may agree that "the survey method is capable of 'tapping' symbolic and behavioral variables of interest to subcultural researchers," the

keeping the peace. Outside the area, or when the threat of another gang is assumed to be high, the group draws together in larger numbers. Thus, while a member of a notorious gang might be reluctant to identify his "formal" group association (in the sense of a named gang), it may also be the case that the peer association which is most usual for him—and probably most meaningful—is the smaller group.

In our Chicago research, we asked a somewhat similar question of our gang and non-gang boys. The data are reported in Table 1.⁷

TABLE 1
PATTERNS OF "USUAL" ASSOCIATION REPORTED BY RACE, CLASS,
AND GANG STATUS OF RESPONDENTS

DO YOU USUALLY STAY PRETTY MUCH BY YOURSELF, DO YOU GO AROUND WITH JUST ONE OR TWO CLOSE FRIENDS, OR DO YOU USUALLY GO AROUND WITH A REGULAR GROUP OF GUYS?	STATUS OF RESPONDENTS					
	Negro			White		
	Gang (N=205)	Lower Class (N=88)	Middle Class (N=26)	Gang (N=90)	Lower Class (N=76)	Middle Class (N=53)
By self.....	13.7%	13.6%	3.8%	8.9%	9.2%	1.9%
One or two friends.....	61.0	50.0	57.7	30.0	40.8	43.4
Regular group.....	25.4	36.4	38.5	61.1	50.0	54.7

validity of the paper's conclusions may be questioned on the basis of the method employed. The problem is not *only* the possible reluctance of gang boys to reveal their gang identity to "a strange young adult"—though this is real enough—it is also a matter of the identity assumed by boys in response to the particular question asked. Close observation of gang boys suggests that pairs, triads, and other small groups are very often the most common form of association within gangs. We have noted, for example, that when they are in the area where they customarily "hang" some gangs disperse themselves on corners, in alleys, poolrooms, on porch steps, etc., rather than gather in a large group. In the area, indeed, many detached workers spend much of their time moving from one small group to another, monitoring the action,

It should be noted that all of the gang boys questioned were known gang members, on the basis of prolonged observation by detached workers and research personnel. The interviewers were validated by the detached workers as persons whom the boys could trust and, therefore, report to honestly. Yet, particularly among Negro boys, the pair or triad is the most commonly reported type of association. The "regular group" is more commonly reported among all the white boys, particularly by gang boys. Our suspicion is that the find-

⁷ Interview procedures are discussed by Short and Strodtbeck, *op. cit.*, and in other project publications, e.g., James F. Short, Jr., Ramon Rivera, and Ray A. Tennyson, "Perceived Opportunities, Gang Membership, and Delinquency," *American Sociological Review*, XXX (February, 1965), 56-67.

ing is related to aleatory elements of risk of trouble (which are likely to be greater among lower-class Negroes) and to heightened social disabilities among Negro gang boys and the greater likelihood that their gangs will be the arena for the playing out of status threats. Such elements combine to produce less larger-group solidarity among Negroes and perhaps less willingness to report association with a regular group among Negroes. *All* of the respondents in this study were members of regular groups. They were, in fact, contacted for the study as a result of these group associations. Yet, many of them chose to identify themselves with one or two friends in answer to our question. Regrettably, we do not have sys-

tematic data on the remainder of the questions posed by Lerman's interviewers.

The point, therefore, is both methodological and theoretical. We do not know the margin of error (if any) introduced by the method. To the extent that the data are reliable, however, they do not deny the gang (regular group) as a setting for delinquent subcultures; they may, in fact, inform its nature. For it is in the closer relations among two or three friends that much of gang life occurs, and it is these associations which lend cohesiveness to groups otherwise often lacking in this quality.

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Reply

In order to highlight the points of difference between James F. Short and myself, it may be useful to summarize briefly the conclusions reported in "Gangs, Networks, and Subcultural Delinquency":¹ (1) "subculture" and "gangs" are not synonymous concepts; (2) boys who participate in a deviant youth culture may or may not be members of regular groups (i.e., gangs); (3) the social unit of a subculture is most accurately described as a network of pairs, triads, groups with names, and groups without names; (4) the pair or triad, not the regular group, is the social unit most frequently used by subcultural boys in their deviance; and (5) survey methods are capable of providing evidence in support of these conclusions.

Short begins his comments by apparently agreeing with conclusions (1) and (2); he omits mention of (3); and he states that he is most concerned with (4) and (5). However, the major thrust of his comments is to question conclusions (2) and (5). I shall reply accordingly.

Short readily admits that "very often"

¹ Paul Lerman, "Gangs, Networks, and Subcultural Delinquency," *American Journal of Sociology*, LXXIII, No. 1 (July, 1967), 63-72.

gang boys pal around in pairs or triads rather than as a total collectivity. However, he ignores the fact that many pairs and triads which by word and deed are active participants in a neighborhood's deviant youth culture are nevertheless *not* members of gangs. This social fact I observed on many occasions when I was a gang worker in Chicago, from 1956 to 1958.² In 1961 I began an effort to utilize systematic research methods to gather evidence that went beyond my own earlier participant observations.

Although opinions about methods vary, the social fact nevertheless remains. We should focus on a more interesting problem: How shall we conceptualize the

² Documentation for these personal observations, as well as evidence showing that many other Chicago gang workers also observed many types of autonomous social units that do not fit the "gang" label, can be found in Catherine V. Richards, *Breaking through Barriers* (Chicago: Welfare Council of Metropolitan Chicago, July, 1960), pp. 29-31. It should be noted that Miss Richards' book is based on observations, records, reports, and discussions with fifty-nine gang workers employed by fourteen different agencies (including the agency that furnished Short with his samples of gang boys) operating in widely scattered parts of Chicago (see *ibid.*, pp. 46-55 and p. 57).