

A Gang

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A community can be defined by many things and in many ways, ranging between being highly structured and hierarchical, such as the military, or much more casual with looser ties and commitments, such as a sports club. A community can be described as a group of people, either very large, such as a city that can have smaller communities within it (such as the City Council which is high up within the power structure of Palmerston North), or small, such as a children's playgroup (which is low down within the power structure), with similar values living within a similar environment and with like values and respecting similar laws. A community often consists of members who share class, education, experience and a similar ideology (Gregory, 2002). The lecture room is one type of community that consists of the students and the lecturer. This can be defined as a fairly open and unstructured type of community but with certain rules and expectations such as students taking notes and asking questions with the lecturer providing information from his or her fund of knowledge and being in a position of authority of a more casual nature than would be expected of an army officer, for example. Both the students and lecturer are present in this community of their own volition as opposed to the restrictions presented by a prison, for example, which is a very closed community. This type of community can be studied as a living entity that has values, goals, structure and hierarchies as only some of its parts. The city of Palmerston North can be defined as a large community made up of many smaller communities, each with their unique role in the overall scheme of things. One such community in Palmerston North is a gang that has one of its chapters situated in one section of town. I felt that a study of the inner workings of such a group would be interesting and eye-opening. I have "patched" friends and have always had an interest in the gang culture of New Zealand.

The study of this community was not one of the easiest to undertake but I felt that the results of such a study would be rewarding and as a community psychologist it will always be

necessary to interact with different types of communities, not just easy and safe environments (McClure, 1998). Also the fact that I had friends within the gang gave me an entrance which others may not have had, but I still undertook certain precautions for my own safety by always meeting in a public place and letting my flatmates know exactly where I was and the time I would return. Although I felt safe with my friend and had scheduled a secret meeting I did not know what his friends were like and I tried to ensure that no-one saw the car I was driving. He also did not wear his patch and so was less identifiable. I notified my friend, who I have called by a pseudonym "Fetu," that I would be also conducting an interview with the Police and assured him that I would protect his anonymity and respect his rights, especially as respect from outsiders is rarely given to gang members. Usually the people who really need help the most and who also need a modicum of respect and understanding are the people at the proverbial bottom of the pile and after studying some of the internal culture of gang life, I realised that the members really have hard lives. A recent tragic murder (Sunday Star Times, March 10, 2002) occurred with gang members going on full alert and angry that Police raids disturbed their mourning (the Press and The Dominion 13 Feb 2002).

An interview was undertaken with "Fetu" who has been a fully patched member of the gang for about 2 years. Before this he was a patched member of another gang in another New Zealand city, but he left and moved to Palmerston North to get away from gang life. He was doing well at sports but said that other work opportunities for him were few and far between and gainful employment was really hard to find, especially as he has been in and out of gaol many times. He began, again, to mingle with old associates from his home town and he literally drifted back into the gang culture again. He states that he only feels good enough and fully accepted when back in a gang and it has become a comfortable way of life for him because he knows the rules and has a sense of belonging and support. Gang life has been the only place where

he has ever felt fully accepted and at home (Ziller, 1976). Perhaps it would be wise to consider that other communities may need to be less judgmental of people who do not conform to their own social values as we should try to understand the reasons behind why people withdraw from "normal" society and feel the need to join a gang and perhaps gain a sense of identity from the gang culture.

The gang has about 2000 members throughout the country at the last count but the Palmerston North branch is relatively small at the moment with about 40 patched members. Many have gone away for a while at the advice of the leader of the Palmerston North chapter, to try to calm tensions between them and another gang that culminated with a tragic shooting of on Waitangi Day (Rising Gang Tensions in Palmerston North, Sunday Star Times March 10, 2002). Fetu said that this event elicited a sad change in the gang and really brought home to him the worst side of gang life.

Given general systems theory (Berrien, 1968; Buckley, 1967; von Bertalanffy, 1962; Gregory, 2002) as a way to approach human groupings, the gang in Palmerston North are a fairly closed system, not as closed as a prison but in the sense that only other members and family really interact comfortably with gang members. Whenever gang members go to other places, such as shopping for example, they always receive stares, glances and are avoided because of the fear and disdain that the patch and their appearance appears to bring out in other people of the city (Hazlehurst and Hazlehurst, 1998).

The head of the Palmerston North gang chapter is A. who has always been involved in gang life since being a very young boy. He became head of Palmerston North Chapter several years ago but Fetu declined to give me the exact date. He reminded me that, even though I am his friend, the gang is his whanau and the place where his loyalty is located. He felt that I did not need to know exact details. Brown (1985) mentions that loyalty to members within a chosen community is high on the list of community priorities, especially in more closed communities with less interaction from outside. This is often because the outside structures that the gang has most contact with are government and council structures such as Housing New Zealand (in relation to the council owned properties that the gang reside in) and the Council Planning Departments (in relation to the

gang's misuse of those properties), and the Police, and therefore the Department of Courts, Community Corrections and Community Probation, with whom the gang appear to have a "running battle". We should note at this point that the gang feels that these structures are oppressing them and providing little help in the way they wish to live and run their community, yet we also need to note the opinions of the wider community that it is the gang that is the problem.

The gang community is actually highly structured with a leader acting as ultimate head who has input and ultimate powers of veto into all decisions regarding the gang and individuals in the gang. The national president of the entire gang movement in New Zealand is B. who, it is suggested, is partly responsible for the gang's identity shift from a street gang to a political and cultural movement. Also C., a former lawyer and pacifist, is the political adviser who it is suggested is conjoint with B. and D. in leadership of the movement (Payne, 1997). I did enquire as to the process of becoming head of a chapter but I was not allowed to be privy to that information. I subsequently made other enquiries of this subject of a person who had once been a prospect for another gang and he suggested it was perhaps a process of proving oneself to be the toughest within the gang, possibly even by use of one's fists and thereby gaining fear and respect and also having had long experience within the gang culture. Another suggestion is that potential chapter leaders may serve a form of "apprenticeship" under B. and then form a chapter within their own area (Payne, 1997). The next person under him is the Sergeant at Arms "Rangi" (not his real name) who provides information to the leader and often acts as a go between and consultant for lower ranked patched members. After him there is general age and respect ranking with older and established patched members able to instruct younger patched members what to do. After them there are older and younger "prospects," who wish to become fully patched members but first need to prove they are trustworthy and have loyalty to the gang only. Often, to prove trustworthiness, tasks such as alleged substance provision, will be undertaken for a certain amount of time by the said "prospects". Once a prospect is completely trusted, he is on his way to gaining a "patch" and becoming a fully-fledged member of the gang, but the actual ritual to get the patch

was not divulged to me. Activities such as rape or anything considered to be deviant (such as paedophilia or family abuse) are punishable by severe beatings and possible expulsion from the gang.

The gang has a high status to the younger and usually Maori or Pacific Island youths. Usually these are young adults of low socio economic groups from large under funded families who have been given little chance or opportunity anywhere else (McClure, 1998). To other members of the Palmerston North community any gangs are usually attributed very low status and are thought of as violent criminals and troublemakers. In the document *"Local Government - Getting to grips with Gangs"* (1997) it is noted that the effects of certain gang activities cause communities to feel fear and frustration. It also mentions that local city councils often need to use taxpayer funding to deal with these gang issues which no doubt leads to more acrimonious response towards the gangs. Fetu recalls an incident where he was walking along the street and a large group of young white males shouted *"You're scum"* at him before rapidly running away. He said he felt quite angry and upset by this incident as he was just walking along the road not troubling anyone (Fetu 2002).

From several conversations that I had with Fetu I gathered that 95 percent of the members had suffered and/or witnessed some forms of abuse when they were younger. Some 70 percent had left school before the age of 14 and none had stayed and completed School Certificate. About 60 percent had run away from home or been placed in the control of Children Youth and Families Agency (formerly CYPS) and placed into foster care from which they often ran away. All had come from low socio economic, lower class, backgrounds with many from single parent families relying solely on the Domestic Purposes Benefit and with many older and younger brothers and sisters. Cuts in benefits resulted in severe deprivation by such families with mainly health and education suffering (Heller et al., 1984). Also being older boys they were often given little time and support from parents who were often quite young themselves and were expected to look after younger siblings. Over 90 percent of mothers and fathers were either absent parents or had substance abuse problems that were never attended to. Therefore the supposed prestige of becoming a gang

member and a sense of belonging and responsibility that goes with it was an easy and maybe one of the very few choices for many young men from these backgrounds.

After my discussions with Fetu I spoke with the Community Group Manager for Palmerston North Police, Noel Bigwood (2002), and he suggested that many of these young men had received so many knocks from within the wider community that the gang is the simple choice for them as once within the gang, they would mix with young men of similar standing who had undergone the same experiences as themselves. He also suggested that the gang provided a sense of identity for these disillusioned young men that they could not find within any other sphere (Rutherford, 1990). Payne (1997) also notes that the recent transition from rural to urban living for many cultures has led to the gangs with their urban ecology being a comfortable home base for many young displaced men.

Women are not patched members in any gangs (as they are not allowed to be) but women who are wives, girlfriends and daughters are respected by the gang and will help in kitchen duties, may drink in the clubhouse but will occupy a fairly low role as compared to a white professional working woman, for example. Many gangs still put women *"on the block"* which basically means available for gang rape, but thankfully now this appears to be becoming a thing of the past for the present gang although other gangs may still do this. This tends to happen not to the wives, girlfriends and daughters of the gang members but to more casually acquainted unfortunate women. From all readings and personal experiences women within the gang culture appear to occupy a lower status role than men (Payne, 1997). Usually the women involved with the gang members have had similar experiences to the gang men with regard to upbringing and socio-economic status. These women have often witnessed violent treatment towards their own mothers (or fathers) within the home setting and this violence cycle perpetuates itself through the generations (Payne, 1997). The women in these situations often use the resources provided by the city council such as Housing New Zealand and government agencies such as Child Youth and Family Agency and government funded benefit schemes such as the Domestic Purposes Benefit, but in a different way to the men because the women seem to take more responsibility for

children and know that these schemes are the only definite funding they can expect due to the unsteady nature of gang employment and earning power. This is the case especially when the men go to gaol and the women have to provide for themselves and their children. The women have little opportunity for empowerment because of needing government support and not having the skills or strengths to be able to provide for themselves and their children. The women always occupy the homemaker role and look after the men so they have a different interaction with council facilities. They need a good house for their children and are often placed within a contradictory role by the gang member boyfriends who are fighting against dependence on the system (the city council). The women understand that this is often their only means towards having a home as they are in the same situations as the men with little education so less able to get a good job and also have little children to look after and few support networks. Also, many families would regard the school as a social setting that has its own support networks but the shame of not being able to provide for one's family, the stigma of gang involvement and the usual gang secrecy lead to these support networks not being used. So, apart from other gang women and close family who often have problems of their own, there is little social support for these families (Dennehy and Newbold, 2001).

The clubhouse belongs more to the men and is not really used for family social gatherings. It is quite a well run operation with the lower members of the hierarchy having responsibility for working behind a well stocked bar, keeping the clubhouse tidy and taking bottles and rubbish to be re cycled at the local landfill. By keeping the clubhouse clean and tidy and using the local landfill provided by Palmerston North City Council, the men are fulfilling a valued social role that others within the wider community may not expect of them and may think they would be more likely to throw their rubbish in the river! (It is interesting to mention at this point that Fetu never drops litter in the street and mentioned that broken glass is dangerous as "*little kids might step on it*") (Fetu, 2002). This indicates that at least some members of gangs have an ecological awareness similar to that in other communities. Women do not serve behind the bar nor do the cleaning outside the kitchen. Their role is similar to the older fashioned women's

role back in the days of "seen and not heard" but perhaps women's globally changing roles may help to influence their positions (Dennehy and Newbold, 2001).

The clubhouse is the site for many social meetings, especially those connected to rugby. The gang is seriously interested in rugby and teams are formed from other chapters and play each other on a regular basis, then have a social gathering afterwards when they chat and exchange news. Rugby is only one of the ways that the chapters interact with each other. As the movement has shifted from a street gang towards a cultural political framework the chapters keep regular contact in a more organised way with chaired "*business*" meetings. This shift towards a more political and cultural movement causes concern to the many local councils involved as a more organised movement could create problems for the councils. Other members of the community want to know what the council is doing to eradicate the problem of local gang tensions and crime and taxpayers money being expended that could be used for other much needed social reforms and help with possible racial tensions (Marshall, 1997).

I was told that every single member of the gang I studied in Palmerston North identifies as Maori or Pacific Islander with most being Maori. Even though the gang welcomes all cultures, there are no Pakeha members in the Palmerston North chapter so far as Fetu was aware.

The gang wishes to be known as not holding prejudice against anybody and there is a local garage called Peoples Automotive Services to indicate this. The members are encouraged to work and keep busy. The young gang member who enjoyed working at this garage before he died was becoming quite a skilled young mechanic.

It appears to be mainly the younger prospects who cause trouble and bring themselves to the attention of the Police and thereby the rest of the gang, whereas the older members enjoy the quiet life and complete their business in a quiet manner without drawing attention to themselves and thus avoid trouble with the law.

All the gang members have either been in gaol or have criminal records. Often these records are based on petty charges that could have been avoided, such as driving without a licence. The reason many younger members have a criminal record is because they will "*take the rap*" for another member who may otherwise go to gaol,

whereas the youngster will get only a fine or periodic detention. Often mistakes made by members will be punished internally within the gang. "Maori" justice is preferred to the Pakeha Courts system (Spoonley, Pearson and Macpherson, 1996). It is a shame that preventative aspects of police work and local council authorities such as Youth Aid, and the work of Community Relations Co ordinators and Gang Liaison Officers is often overshadowed by police law enforcement activities and therefore the police are seen as enemies of the gang rather than a source of support (Buxton et al., 1981). Obviously it is the ultimate job of the Police to protect the residents of the community and to prevent illegal and harmful activities.

So far, a rather depressing picture is painted of a community whose individuals have suffered more than their fair share of the hardships and pitfalls in life and have had little opportunity for empowerment (Rappaport, 1987), and yet a strong sense of values have developed within the gang such as total and complete loyalty towards other members. If a member gets into some trouble, maybe as a fight, he can expect complete backup from all other members. The gang is very close knit and wary of outside attention. They very rarely share any experiences with people outside the gang apart from close family, but in most cases the gang has taken on the role of a family (Gold and Webster, 1989). The ultimate betrayal of the gang is if one of the members "narks" on the others to the Police to get out of trouble themselves. They are expected to take the punishment if they commit a crime and will often serve many stints in gaol but appear to be unafraid of going into gaol as often fellow gang members may also be inmates. When a member goes to gaol they often have less worries than before as they have everything provided for them and no bills to pay. Often their women will bring anything they may need to gaol when they visit. Prison is a closed community full of gang members, among others, and fosters a strong sense of standing together for the gang members.

The gang appears to replace the older notion of Maori tribes and often the Maori haka and other rituals are performed but I was not privy to these. The values of mana and utu are closely followed and respected. Whether this will lead to a member of the other local gangs being slain I would not like to speculate. It is alleged that members of another local gang murdered the

young man previously mentioned. This has led to increased gang tensions.

The gang exerts power over people within its sphere such as the young forgotten boys who need a sense of family and their own identity. The gang brings that sense of family and within that, a sense of needed leadership. The feeling of power by wearing a patch is important to members where everywhere else they would get little or no respect but, as other people see a patch and are scared, this is the only respect they get.

The suggestion that any gang members were homosexual got me a very nasty look with the gang being very homophobic. The idea of homosexuality appears to clash with the sense of staunch masculinity upheld by all members of the gang. Staunchness is another highly important value of the gang. There are no members of the gang who have not received and given out severe beatings and all are quite prepared to use weapons in any way, shape or form. From observations and information gleaned it seems that generally a gang member's friends are other gang members because they are the only ones who can be trusted. The local leader encouraged the members to vote in the local body elections but many paid little attention even to being on electoral rolls because there is a sense of "*what good will politicians do for us?*" as a gang. There is a sense of looking inward as a gang for all support. Help is not sought outside the gang, such as talking to a counsellor, as this would not be "*staunch*".

The gang allegedly generate money by certain measures deemed criminal by the law and it was suggested to me that I should not delve too deeply into the economic structures of the gang. Obviously these were problems that I had expected to encounter and they did not surprise me as I had chosen a difficult community that fastidiously maintains its privacy from outsiders. Indeed, why should I expect to be trusted, especially as I was trying to get as much information as possible and I was reminded that I was a "*baldhead*" (pronounced "*bal-ead*"), and what was I going to do in return. I felt that this was fair enough so I brought something for Fetu and shared it with him and I felt that this gesture actually gained me a bit of respect. I also felt it necessary to share some of my background and I swore that all the internal gang-related information that Fetu provided and that I saw would be kept secret. Also some parts of the conver-

sation we had were not allowed to be discussed elsewhere or recorded and I have respected that right (Gregory, 1998).

Obviously, due to recent events, things are very tense within the gang with the awful and unnecessary shooting of such a young boy still in their minds. I felt I was lucky to be granted any information at all. The gang does provide support with a strong sense of whanau for the members without it. The gang's main strength appears to be its utter loyalty towards all members and its ability to disregard certain behaviours (often while drunk or high on other substances) that would be deemed unacceptable in other communities. Members are totally understanding of each other, for if and when someone becomes uncontrollable, the others will simply toss them into a bed somewhere. All members have a deep understanding of what it is like to not appreciate the finer things in life and they all understand and share in the tragedy of harsh upbringings and what a lack of education and on-going cycles of violence can lead to. These harsh realisations are often what leads to substance abuse because as young children they had to develop thick skins to survive tough environments. They felt in alcohol and drugs a release from the pressures of their lifestyle, but it is an ironic fact that life within the gang continually perpetuates this lifestyle and therefore it becomes a weakness. I feel that there are many psychological needs that are not and cannot be met by the gang such as the alcohol, drug abuse, unemployment and health issues. The trouble with using substances as a form of release is the physical and mental health problems that they cause which leaves the gang members trapped in a constant vicious circle. Because of their alleged criminal activities and lack of acceptance by the wider community and lack of education they find it hard to gain employment and therefore allegedly use illegal methods of money making. The continual abuse of substances for relief of problems and excitement then leads to expensive health and social problems that leads to further withdrawal from the wider society and often cannot be solved from within the gang either. We have already noted the gang's general dislike of sharing its problems with the outside community that is already seen as uncaring. Perhaps the need to talk about inner feelings and solve problems rather than simply deny them by substance abuse (like negative reinforcement) is also a weakness than cannot be solved within

the gang and is also countered by the necessity to be staunch (and not enquire about professional counselling help). This, in turn, actually makes it a weakness of the gang. The gang has a certain amount of strength in that it accepts and always wants more members who are often those individuals who nobody else wants or will accept. If you were to ask any member of the public their opinion on gangs their responses are quite likely to be highly negative so the gang is correct in its feeling of isolation and thought that the wider community does not want or like them. Quite often the need for attention, even if negative, is better than no attention at all as human beings are naturally social creatures and all have a need for food, protection, warmth and love. The gang needs help programmes in its multiple systems from better education to child-care to dealing with substance abuse. People often see gangs as causing and being a problem and do not understand that they have problems of their own which may not be of their own making. Perhaps people need to understand that gang members do have feelings and needs like everyone else.

I enjoyed talking with Fetu and interacting with other members and I tried not to be nervous in their presence. They were polite and respectful towards me but I felt a sense that I was not trusted and I would never be a part of their world. It is worthy at this point to note that I only had an etic point of view and I feel that if the gang allowed, this could become an extremely interesting ethnography by using participant observation. However, I do not think I would be the one to do it. I did not feel that my attention would be tolerated for much longer but it was a worthwhile study and an extremely enjoyable and eye opening experience. I also feel the need to mention at this point that it would be wise to consider that the gentlemen I spoke to may well have exaggerated or even concocted some information set down in this paper in regard to my enquiries. I do not mean this to sound rude in any way but I feel it is a worthwhile point to mention and the mark of a good theorist may be to consider possible shortcomings of their work. Also my interpretation of the knowledge provided may have affected the data as I thankfully received a very different mode of upbringing and have had different social experiences and no participation experience within the deep structures of any gang culture. I promised that my sources would remain

confidential as certain so called edge of society groups may not appreciate being studied "under the microscope". I feel with the knowledge I have gained that I may be able to help and provide suggestions for future intervention (Musitu, 1999) and aid that may be required by my friends in the movement.

SUMMARY

The topic concerning this paper is a local gang situated within the community of Palmerston North. This paper examines through the use of personal interviews, readings and general observation how the gang community is structured. It also examines how the gang interacts with other members of the wider community and examines its needs, strengths, weaknesses, values, roles and place in the community. It also examines its connections to the political, economic and social systems in the Palmerston North area, especially Palmerston North City Council.

KEY WORDS Gang. Patched. Loyalty. Staunch

ABSTRACT Gangs form like peer groups, and include especially young men of minority groups, who are usually dispossessed, and who find themselves barred from easy entry into the larger society. Membership in a gang is marked in New Zealand by a patch (or badge) on a black leather jacket. Membership provides those involved with friends, social networks, activities, values, a sense of identity, and a means of gaining a livelihood, even if different from that acceptable to the rest of society. Although those in the larger society often fear gangs and gang members, that larger society may set up stigma, discrimination, and other patterns of behaviour that help to create and to maintain gangs. The author examined a gang operating in Palmerston North and noted that it serves some valuable purposes for members.

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