

Understanding gang activity through the lens of social theory

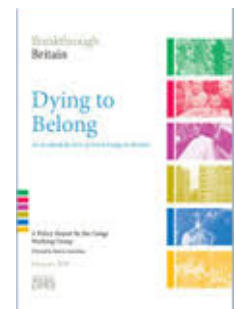
An EUGANGS case study by Eve Phillips

*With its focus on psychology and social factors, the EUGANGS VET programme seeks to equip students with an understanding of the underlying factors which can lead young people to engage in gang activity. This case study illustrates how Eve Phillips, a domestic abuse education advisor with Sandwell Women's Aid, made the link between social theories covered on the course and her understanding of gang behaviour. She did this by following the theme of '**belonging** and **alienation**', looking at both evidence and theory. As she did so, Eve developed a critique of the way gang behaviour is interpreted by wider society.*

The identification of social factors related to gang membership

The Centre for Social Justice *Dying to Belong* report¹ identifies several factors for why certain groups of young people might feel alienated:

- Consumerism increasingly defines our culture even while the gap between the rich and the poor gets bigger.
- Industry is less able to provide work for young people and its replacement by the 'knowledge economy' has left many young people who would have been working class, workless.
- Social housing has become ghettoised.
- Fewer council properties are being built, more have been sold, the few that are then left are allocated to the most vulnerable and often those with the most complex needs that are often left unmet.



Stuart Hall's critique of the concept of 'Britishness' and the alienation of non-white youth

Stuart Hall² states that 'in common understanding, the nation is usually imagined as white'. The point is that racial assumptions based on nationality are bound up in that country's history. Of course it is something that can change, but this depends upon representations of non-white people in British history books, in the media, in politics etc. For young people to be implicitly denied a part of their identity can be extremely **alienating**. Hall states that



'**belonging** is a tricky concept, requiring both identification and recognition' i.e. self-identification and being accepted by others as being what you say you are. The latter should be a given, but it isn't for many. Finding shared identity and **belonging** in a gang is therefore an understandable want.

¹ <http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/publications/dying-to-belong>

² <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2000/oct/15/britishidentity.comment1>

Clifford Geertz and the desire ‘to be somebody in the world’

Clifford Geertz talked about various ways in which multi-linguistic/multi-cultural/multi-religious/multi-racial nations cohabit. He speaks of the desire of peoples to be recognised as distinct states in and of themselves as ‘a search for an identity’. People feel this identity must also be publically acknowledged, ‘a social assertion of the self as “being somebody in the world”³ which consolidates Hall’s characterisation of **belonging**.

This idea of ‘**being somebody in the world**’ also relates to whose history History records, and to the sometimes active quest for notoriety of some gangs. If the dominant culture does not allow you to feel like somebody in the world perhaps the dominant culture needs challenging.

This feeling could be caused by micro-aggressions felt daily by an individual as a result of their race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability, illness.

Geertz goes on to say that ‘the other aim is practical: it is a demand for progress, for a rising standard of living, more effective political order, greater social justice’. I think that this is also applicable to gangs; I believe that the establishment refuses to admit or legitimise gang activity as political activity when very often, for all of the reasons bullet-pointed at the start of this essay, it is.



If you would like to find out more about Eve’s engagement in the EUGANGS project, you can contact here at:
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³ Geertz, C (1963) The integrative revolution: primordial sentiments and politics in the new states, in: Clifford Geertz (ed.): *Old societies and new states: the quest for modernity in Asia and Africa*. London, Collier Macmillan