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# Liquid Soldiers: Fluidity and Gang Membership

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This study investigates relational gang dynamics through qualitative in-depth interviewing with former gang members. Assumed gang process such as violent initiation rituals required for entrance and violent episodes when leaving a gang are called into question by the narratives of former gang members. Furthermore, the lines of inclusion for gangs are not clear, especially in regards to affiliates and associates, which may lead to some confusion about gangs from outside observers in the law enforcement and research arenas.

The pioneering efforts of gang researchers in the social sciences opened the field through qualitative research and examinations of group dynamics (Thrasher 1927; Whyte 1943; Short and Strodtbeck 1968). With the rise of politically conservative regimes in the 1980s, gang intervention focused on suppression tactics and gang research followed suit by concentrating solely on the criminal aspects of gangs (Klein 1995). With the focus on the criminology of gangs, other aspects of deviant behavior, group processes, and group dynamics seem to have been relatively ignored (Klein 2007:XIV). More recent works have begun to rectify this apparent lack (Klein and Maxson 2006; Decker et al. 2008). As the gang landscape is ever changing, this current study seeks to continue opening the seldom studied aspect of gang processes and dynamics and reinvigorate the study of gangs in the context of group boundaries, specifically gang membership and the fluidity of membership status.

To accomplish this, the present study uses qualitative in-depth interviews with former gang members in San Antonio, Texas to understand definitional dynamics. Assumed gang process such as violent initiation rituals required for entrance and violent episodes when leaving a gang are called into question by the narratives of former gang members. Furthermore, findings similar to that of Fleisher (2002) indicate that the lines of inclusion for gangs are not clear, especially in regards to affiliates and associates, which may lead to some confusion about gangs from outside observers in the law enforcement and research arenas. This research suggests that categorization as a gang member is more of an academic/legal question but ultimately irrelevant to the gang members themselves. Association and membership in a gang from the member's perspectives seems to be a function of what is happening at the time and who is there during the event.

An abundance of previous gang literature has focused on the emergence of deviant subcultures (Cohen 1955; Cloward and Ohlin 1960), individual predictors of joining gangs (Lahey et al. 1999), and the salient aspects of violence or participation in the drug market (Fagan

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1989). While the importance of these factors are inarguable, the narrow focus on these subjects leads researchers to operate without regard to the composition of a gang and to forgo defining the actual membership of a gang. These deficits lead to the faulty attributions of criminal behavior to gangs as a whole, rather than individual members and to deterministic assumptions about gang members (Fleisher 2002). The current study brings the issues of defining membership back to the surface and opens a few other avenues of inquiry as well.

Although much literature exists explaining individual motives for joining gangs such as economic reasons, recreation (Jankowski 1990), and protection (Johnstone 1983; Houchas and Sousa 1988), very little research has been conducted concerning the actual demarcation line of being considered a gang member. Some notable exceptions to this are Padilla's (1992) description of the *V-in* initiation ritual and Vigil's (1996) explanation of the significance of the gang initiation ritual. While these descriptions are invaluable to the field of gang research, they are based on particular gangs or gang types, necessitating further research in the area of gang initiation and lines of demarcation that determine who is a gang member. It seems logical that one could deduce who is a gang member from the definition of a gang member; however, this logic falls short because definitional arguments have concentrated on what is a gang (Ball and Curry 1995), rather than who is a gang member (Curry and Decker 2003). The accepted method of using self-identification as a gang member to determine membership (Curry and Decker 2003) suffers from a lack of specification. The aforementioned method ignores levels of involvement and contributes little to determining the line of demarcation between members and non-members. Not self-identifying as a gang member does not preclude a person from engaging in gang activities nor does it preclude other gang members from viewing the person as a gang member.

Definitional problems have plagued the study of gangs since its inception. Ball and Curry (1995) give an extensive review and analysis of denotative, analytic, synthetic, and implicative methods of definition. Some researchers and theorists have used a denotative method of defining gangs. The denotative method is a precise definition that leaves no room for ambiguity, and primarily consists of examples that represent what is being defined. Using the denotative method causes two problems. The first problem is that the denotative term evolves into a connotative expression (Ball and Curry 1995). The term evokes an emotion and the meaning of the term is tied to the emotion. For instance, the terms *erotica* and *pornography* can refer to the same thing depending on the beholder, but the term *pornography* has more of a negative connotation. This connotative issue is the same with the word *gang* as opposed to *crew*, *posse*, *clique*, or *squad*. Secondly, denotative definitions would have to include all applicable examples, and the fact that there is great variation between gangs and continuous changes in gangs makes the task extremely difficult (Ball and Curry 1995).

Analytic definitions list the properties of the gang. The problem with this type of definition is the tendency to focus on one property and ignore others. A common property in the analytic definition of gangs is criminal behavior (Ball and Curry 1995). A popular example of this is Klein's (1971) definition:

For our purposes, we shall use the term gang to refer to any denotable adolescent group of youngsters who (a) are generally perceived as a distinct aggregation by others in their neighborhood, (b) recognize themselves as a denotable group (almost invariably with a group name) and (c) have been involved in a sufficient number of delinquent incidents to call forth a consistent negative response from neighborhood residents and/or enforcement agencies. (p. 13)

Law-enforcement agencies and some researchers who consider violence or criminal behavior the most salient property of gangs favor analytic definitions (Ball and Curry 1995). The perceived saliency of a certain property causes several problems. First, properties other than crime are ignored or overlooked. Secondly, variations between gangs are ignored. Lastly, violence and criminal behavior are always assumed to be gang-related. Attributing gang motivation to crimes ignores Matza's (1990) argument that the deviant behavior of an individual was a response to the adolescent situation of feeling trapped and controlled rather than a motive of the gang of which he was a part. Fleisher (2002) continues this line of reasoning and indicates that the widely held concept of the gang as a group or an organization is false. Fleisher (2002) studied female members of various gangs in Champaign, Illinois. None of the members knew all of the other members of the gang, and the majority knew less than 10% of the other members. Thus rather than being a unified gang, the members are described as being a part of a social network. Fleisher (2002) argues against the concept of the gang as a group and classification of crimes as gang-motivated or gang-related, because most of these events have nothing to do with the whole group, but everything to do with the small social network of the individuals involved. The saliency of violence as a property of gangs is highly problematic and a major flaw in the use of analytic definitions.

Some researchers use the implicative method of definition. The implicative method defines gangs as a dynamic process (Ball and Curry 1995). This type of definition is associated with emic methodology, which tries to view the gang through the perspective of the research subject. The problem with this method of definition is that it lacks precision, which is unsatisfactory for those who do not adhere to emic methodology (Ball and Curry 1995).

Another alternative way of defining gangs is through synthetic definitions. Synthetic definitions combine other types of definitions and try to place the phenomenon in a broader context (Ball and Curry 1995). Examples of this would be Yablonsky's (1959) definition of the gang as a near-group, which is somewhere in between an organized group and a disorganized mob. While these types of definitions seem better suited for research, there are still a few problematic issues. First, a common mistake is confusing correlated variables with analytic properties. For instance, stating that gangs consist of adolescent males is a correlate not a property because gangs are not exclusively adolescent or male (Ball and Curry 1995). A second mistake is using causal factors in the definition, and a third problem in synthetic definitions is stating that a group is a gang because other groups, such as law enforcement agencies, define them as a gang (Ball and Curry 1995).

It has been convincingly argued that gangs are not groups. Yablonsky's (1959) study showed that authorities and the media misidentified gangs as organized groups. He found this assumption to be incorrect because the gangs he studied had no measurable number of members, no definition of membership, no specific roles of members, no understood consensus of gang norms, and no clear flow from leadership to action. All of these empirical arguments seem to have fallen on deaf ears as researchers continue to advocate standardized definitions of gangs (Yearwood and Hayes 2000). Standardizing definitions may make quantitative research on gangs easier, but it will be at the cost of accuracy, spawning the question, "Are we measuring what is real, or what we have decided is easier for us?" Thus, if gangs are not the standardized entities that they were thought to be and are more accurately described as near-groups or social networks, then a logical step in exploratory research is investigating the composition of a gang.

It is pertinent to determine whether modern gang membership fits previously established definitions of gang members before attempting to apply those definitions to modern gang members. Instead of looking solely at the presupposed criminality of gangs and avoiding the fallacy of

reification in suggesting that gangs are entities that take action, the aim here is to determine who is actually in a gang and whether there are solid rules of membership. If there are not solid rules for membership, then standardized definitions lose their validity and may need to be reformulated.

The present data indicate that gang membership among the sample of young people was very fluid with some entering the gang without initiation rituals and leaving without consequences. Furthermore, gang members were able to switch gangs with relative ease and with no adverse consequences. These findings are important because they call for a new examination of gang membership processes in the modern gang landscape.

## DATA AND METHODS

The current research began as an exploratory qualitative inquiry of former gang members in San Antonio, Texas, concerning the processes of persistence or dissipation of gangs. The exploratory approach revealed unexpected data indicating that membership is a fluid process, with unclear boundaries of inclusion. My findings support the empirical findings of Yablonsky (1959) and reinforce the social networks of gangs revealed by Fleisher (2002).

Previous definitions of gangs have been problematic and future definitions are likely to share the same issues. The argument over gang definitions has continued since the inception of gang research resulting in hundreds of gang definitions. The problem may partially be that there are different types of gangs or as may be evidenced in this study that gangs change over time. Regardless of the inadequacy of all gang definitions, few if any would argue that gangs do not exist, and their existence thereby necessitates using the tools, flawed as they may be, that we have available to investigate the phenomenon, and definitional problems do not negate the importance of investigating the phenomenon of gangs. As such, of the available definitions, the one that portrays fluidity and which covers all necessary dynamics is Ball and Curry's (1995:240) definition of a gang as "a spontaneous semisecret, interstitial, integrated but mutable social system whose members share common interests and that functions with relatively little regard for legality but regulates interaction amongst its members." To this definition, I will add the correlates of a notion of territoriality and loyalty, an adverse relationship with law enforcement and other institutional authorities, varying frequency of engaging in delinquent acts, and hostility towards other groups with similar characteristics. It is important to note that by correlates I mean phenomena that often occur together but are not necessary to be defined as a gang. Initially, the operational definition of gang members in this study was anyone who self-identified as such, which is a method given favor by previous research (Esbenson et al. 2001). However, this system became very problematic because it has no recourse for associate members, thus I included individuals who did not identify as gang members but fit all the other characteristics of a gang member.

The study was conducted in 2005 using fourteen in-depth interviews and one telephone interview with former gang members in San Antonio, Texas. The use of former gang members in this study was a result of an Institutional Review Board (IRB) restriction against current members. The respondents were in the age range of 23 to 30. This age group was selected to generate knowledge about gangs from the time of interest, which will be the late 1980s to the mid 1990s, the time of their gang tenure. Howell and colleagues (2002) report that nine out of ten localities reported what is termed "late onset gangs," which are those gangs that appeared between 1986 and 1996. The late onset gangs were distinguished from traditional gangs by having more females, more

Caucasians, more racial/ethnic mixture, and more middle-class teens. Late onset gangs are groups that occur in “emerging gang problem cities” (Spergel and Curry 1990). According to law enforcement agencies, San Antonio, TX, was an emerging gang problem city (Spergel et al. 2005) making it an ideal location for the study of late onset gangs.

A quota sample was attempted so that gang members from the major gang affiliations would be represent. The sample consisted primarily of former members of the Bloods, Crips, People, and Sureno affiliations, and although two respondents were intermediately associated with a Folk gang, their primary affiliation was with other groups so there was not any solid representation of the Folk nation gangs.

The process of respondent contact began with the researcher visiting a neighborhood of gang reputé, establishing communication with a gatekeeper and subsequent contact with possible respondents. Only two possible participants were eliminated from the sample. One was not used because an age difference which placed his tenure as a gang member after the time period in question. The other was not used in the sample because his gang status was still active. The sample consisted of 4 black males, 1 mixed race (black/white) male, 3 Mexican-American males, 1 Puerto Rican male, 4 white males, and 2 Mexican-American females. This study concerned itself strictly with street gangs. The majority of respondents lived in the Northeast region of San Antonio during their gang tenure. While this is not highly representative of San Antonio, the sample is an expected result of snowball sampling. Respondents were accessed through snowball sampling, which is a procedure used largely for exploratory purposes that consists of respondents and gatekeepers introducing the researcher to other possible respondents (Babbie 2002:179). It should be noted that snowball sampling had the added benefit of support for the legitimacy of the respondents. Beyond self-identification as a gang member or associate, other gang members recognized the respondents as such. Every effort was made to protect the identity of respondents, whose names have been replaced with pseudonyms of my creation. See Table 1. for a breakdown of demographic data.

TABLE 1  
Demographic Breakdown

	<i>Age</i>	<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Region</i>
Dj Cast	26	White	Male	NE—Converse
Kinkaid	27	Black	Male	Northeast
Mama T	26	Mex-American	Female	Northeast/West
Lil' Soldja	24	Black/White	Male	Northeast
Rush	28	Mex-American	Male	Northeast—Universal City
Cajun	27	White	Male	NE—Live Oak
T-Note	25	Puerto Rican	Male	Newark, NJ NE—Schertz
Scrappy	26	White	Male	Northeast
Shuga	27	Black	Male	Northeast
Pranx	23	Black	Male	East
Balla	23	Black	Male	East
Royal	26	Mex-American	Male	Central/West Northeast
Azul	26	White	Male	Tulsa, OK
Oso	30	Mex-American	Male	South
Sleek	23	Mex-American	Female	Northeast/South

The study was done in San Antonio, Texas, because of the known extensiveness of its gang situation. A report by the Texas Attorney General's office (Stanley 1991) stated that San Antonio did report having a gang problem, and that the gangs were using high-powered weaponry such as the AK-47 and the SKS. During the time period in question, San Antonio was known as the drive-by capital of Texas (Spergel 2005). Indeed, Sikes (1997:98, 102) reports that the sheriff's office listed only one drive-by shooting in 1988, but 5 years later in 1993 incidents jumped to 642 drive-bys between January and June. The entertainment industry also made note of the gang situation in San Antonio when a famous rap artist from California released a song proclaiming San Antonio to be "just like Compton" (a city adjacent to Los Angeles, notorious for its gang situation and the birthplace of the Piru Bloods). The volatile situation in San Antonio during the time period that this study is concerned with is portrayed by one of the respondents,

Oso: When I was living in San Diego (California), the gangsters there were like "oh, you are from San Antonio, we heard ya'll are crazy down there."

## FINDINGS

The results of this study shed light on the difficulty researchers and officials have in defining gangs. The aforementioned groups tend to favor stable definitions that can be applied in a variety of circumstances. However, Yablonsky (1959) argued that gangs had no measurable number of members and no definition of membership. Evidence for both arguments was apparent in the accounts of the respondents in my study. For instance, many of the subjects had difficulty defining the number of gang members in their groups. Five of the subjects were a part of the Sa Town Bloods. However, when responding to the question of how many members were in the gang, the participant's answers varied,

Dj Cast (26): Well, I was in a specific set, S.T.B.'s, which we created, me and my friends in school . . . I mean in the very beginning it was say 10 friends . . . I say by the end of one year we had already accumulated a good 30 or so and I swear by the next year we heard about them in different schools and everything and we didn't even know these people. You know they were claiming our set, so we had already blown up to that status where people would copycat, which was cool.

Kinkaid (27): I mean it was lots, but just the ones that I hung with it was pretty much maybe like 10, 10 yeah, maybe a little more.

Rush (28): Man, at one time like maybe 20 guys I can remember just standing out there on the side looking at them Crips standing up against the Cafeteria at the gray campus at Judson High School. We just, they never fucked with us because there was just too many of us, it was lots of us and we had all kinds of sets there and they had Crips there, but I think that pretty much there were more of us than there was of them . . . but so I would say 20 maybe at the most before everybody started going to alternative school and getting to where they wouldn't go to class anymore.

Scrappy (26): Ain't no tellin'. I can't say, I'd say, the people I knew, about 50 or 60 of them in that one deal.

Lil' Soldja (24): I'd say about 8 that knew.

While numerical discrepancies are obvious in these accounts, further details about these respondents make the non-matching numbers more significant. Rush seems to include members of other Blood sets in his answer, which may be the case with Scrappy also; however, their accounts do not match. Furthermore, Lil' Soldja says that he entered the gang at 15. The other Sa Town Bloods entered the gang at age 14, which places Lil' Soldja's entry into the gang at least three years after the others, yet his count was only 8. While it is possible that the other members had left the gang by this time, it may indicate the occurrence of dissipation. None of the other respondents were from the same group, so comparisons were not possible. However, none of the other respondents could give a definite number of members and most had difficulty even approximating. For instance,

Cajun (D.O.G.): Well, the group is not black and white . . . I mean it's fluid, it's not set in stone because there were so many people that were this set and that set and that were different but the same and these people got along and these people didn't get along, but it just really depends. Because I moved so much, I identified with different people at different times, and you know I would say at some point with some of the people I was running around with, I've heard that there is like over 500,000 nationwide, so that is a lot of people, but it really depends upon, you know. I don't know all of them so it's just who you know and who you are really tight with.

Oso (Klik): Maybe like five hundred, six hundred people.

The fact that the respondents could not account for numerical membership in their own gangs does not indicate that they had distorted, inaccurate, or exaggerated perceptions. Yablonsky (1959) notes that members do not really know how many other members there are and what their roles are. This situation may occur because gangs are not the definitive entities that officials have claimed they are. Fleisher's (2002) study also showed that the members knew less than 10% of the members of their gang, and the sub-groups or small social networks were more descriptive of the experience of a gang member's relation to the gang. The respondents in this study provided some confirmation of the social network scenario,

Dj Cast: Well, I think with any group of friends period. I mean you get together with like your work colleagues, no matter how you put it you know, you got people who you know everybody at work is friends, but certain people from work will go out to the bar together or you know go shoot pool together. Same thing with the set, you know you have a set of 30 to 50 dudes, which was a relatively small set but that was our set. 50 dudes, you know all get along; we come together when we need to, but you know, there was just several groups of friends within that group that would hang out more.

I: Were there any subgroups or sub cliques in the gang?

Cajun: All the damn time, all the damn time. Some people are tighter with others and before you would know it, you might be in the same gang but ya'll are fighting too, because there is just a lot of personalities involved and you know people are different sometimes.

Fleisher (2002) also pointed out that most of the respondents in the Champaign study had several members of other gangs in their gang's social network. Some of the respondents in this study indicated similar situations. *Royal*, a former Big Time King, had this to say,



Well when I was younger, we would always break off. It was like 5 or 6 in the immediate group but when we would meet up with people you know, 30, 50 people, just depending on who we met up with because we were just one individual set. But we, we just didn't hang by ourselves you know what I mean, and then not only that but we would hang out with other gangs, um, because we were black (*gang color*), so you know the BBZ- the Bad Boyz, the Latin Kings, anybody who was black ragers, and red ragers were cool too, at that time, it was just basically the difference between red and black was Mexican and Black (*laughs*) you know what I mean.

The social gang network provides a basis for understanding the difficulty in counting gang members. However, little research has been conducted concerning people who are affiliated or associated with gangs. Nearly all of the respondents indicated that there were members that were only temporary and not fully affiliated. This was accepted as a normal thing and not looked upon negatively.

Royal: Yes, you always had them you know . . . they would always be affiliated, they were there one year, not there the next year, you know what I mean, or they would, they would move, you know, but yeah, you always had some like that. It wasn't a problem, as long as you were down to fight with us; we were cool with that. As long as you had our back and that is basically that.

People who were temporarily or not fully affiliated with gangs create a quagmire for those attempting to determine the membership of a gang. Words such as affiliate, associate, and wannabe are used to refer to these individuals (Vigil 1998). However, the line between these individuals and other gang members is thin and often transparent. For example, *Pranx* is a respondent who grew up and lived most of his life in the Wheatley Courts, a notorious east side neighborhood known for its gang involvement. *Pranx* was never officially rolled-in, which means he did not participate in the gang's initiation rite in which an individual must withstand a physical attack from several other members simultaneously. Because he did not go through an initiation rite, he does not consider himself an actual member; however, he stated that he and anyone else who moved into the neighborhood would be "down" with the Wheatley Courts. The word "down" is used by gangs to state that someone is siding with a certain group and will fight for and support that group. Furthermore, *Pranx* went everywhere with that group and although he did not participate in violence, he participated in illicit drug sales and other criminal activities with the gang. *Pranx* no longer lives in the Wheatley Courts but maintains frequent associations with the members. He wears the color red daily to represent his affiliation and will openly declare his association, yet at the same time declare that he is not a member. Other than an initiation rite, the attributes of *Pranx* are remarkably similar to people that officials normally label as gang members. *Pranx* explained that he wanted to be a member but the others thought he had too much potential for other things so they never initiated him, however they still allowed him to participate in all other activities as he was still a part of the neighborhood. *Pranx* would eventually go on to college, but still wore the colors of the group and represented his association.

*Pranx* exemplifies the problem of determining who is and who is not a gang member. If an individual has many blatant attributes of a status, the individual's denial of that status seems

insufficient to exclude them from membership. To be clearer, it is difficult to exclude associates and affiliates from gang membership for these reasons:

1. Not being a member of a gang does not preclude a person from being a gangster—these individuals still commit crimes in conjunction with the members of a gang (see Hagedorn's treatise on the "homeboy" category of members, 1994).
2. Any outside group will not differentiate between the supposed associate and the larger group.
3. Law enforcement officials label this individual as a member if he is encountered with the group and especially if they are caught committing crimes together.
4. Opposing groups will consider the supposed associate an enemy and attack him along with the group, and alternately the supposed associate will defend others from an attack on a group he is with.

The reasons stated above make the difference between associates/affiliates and members almost negligible to any outside observer, be it law enforcement, social researchers, or other gangs. It can be argued that this type of individual is not likely to initiate attacks on other people; however, their known and flagrant association with a group and representation of its colors and/or symbols are an invitation to conflict with other groups. A report from the Texas Attorney General's office (Stanley 1991) concerning a gang survey given to Texas cities showed that reported gang membership could vary by a factor of 2 or 3 due to the issue of associates/affiliates. The report noted that there was no uniform definition for what a gang is or who is in it (Stanley 1991). Each police department establishes its own definition. Cities like Houston, Texas made a point of excluding associates/affiliates, while others like El Paso and Corpus Christi included them in their gang files as associate members (Stanley 1991). The concept of associate member rather than associate or affiliate seems more accurate due to reasons listed above as well as the perceptions of the gang members themselves. For instance, *Scrappy*, a proclaimed member, had this to say:

There were some that weren't fully affiliated. Like getting, they didn't get rolled in or nothing like that, they just hung around. There was certain people like that, but the way it was with those people, were just as much as us . . . because you know they were hanging around us, something happens, they are in it. So really it was like they were a part of it. If you hanging around, you are a part of it, but you are not really a rolled in, true way to get in type stuff.

The account given by *Balla*, an associate, agrees with this description,

Yeah, see like me, I wasn't actually a member but I was real close to them. People actually thought I was (a member) because of how much I hung around them. But you basically, you in or you out. They knew I wasn't in, but they knew I was cool . . . and I was down for whatever they did, you know what I'm saying, but when it came down to it, you know, I didn't, I didn't claim it like that you know. I basically did everything they went through, I just wasn't you know full time like that you know.

Both *Scrappy* and *Balla*'s accounts suggest that a person's "situated self," or a self shaped by situations, leads to inclusion in being viewed as a gang member (Hewitt 1988). It is evident that associates are very much a part of the gang and gang landscape and therefore should be included as associate members when defining gang members rather than be simply ignored. Before proceeding a few more categories should be discussed.

Wannabes are another category of people that are sometimes excluded from being defined as gang members by law enforcement agencies (Stanley 1991). Wannabes refers to those persons who desire to be in the gang, but are currently not a part of the gang. Although wannabes may not be fully accepted in the gang arena, their activities still mirror that of other gang members and full acceptance is their goal. *Royal* discusses wannabe status in response to being asked at what age he joined a gang,

... fifth grade, a wannabe in sixth and seventh grade, because I don't think nobody truly is, but you can't say a wannabe is not dangerous, you know what I'm saying, they are trying to prove... I guess we were just in that wannabe stage, so I say about sixth grade. Seventh grade is when I got rolled in downtown.

Thus, for practical purposes, wannabes can be classified in this study together with associate members. Taking into account the presence of associate members and wannabes, it is easier to understand the confusion of authorities, as well as the gang members themselves about who is and who is not included in the gang.

Two other categories that require discussion are peripheral members and core members. These groups are reported as always being classified as gang members by authorities and others. The report from the Texas Attorney General's office (Stanley 1991) makes these distinctions between the two categories: Core members have a longer history with the gang, usually joining between 10 and 14 years of age and leaving the gang when they are 22 years or older whereas peripherals join the gang between 14 and 18 years of age and leave when they are 20 or older. Both groups are involved in violence, but more criminality is found in core members. And although identification with the gang or using the gang as identification is strong in peripheral members, it is profound in core members.

One could still argue that the differences between core, peripheral, and associate members are sufficient and that there has to be a point at which associates cross over into becoming members. The process is not as simple as this argument would suggest. If associates/affiliates are considered members, then issues of recruiting become extremely complex. This complexity emerges when determining what recruitment means. Is it the courtship of a potential new member of the gang, or is it actually becoming a new member of the gang? As a variable, courtship of a potential member is too difficult to examine because problems of definition again arise. The actual joining by a new member is less complex, except that there has to be a point at which a person crosses the line from a non-member to member. An apparent and often used line of determining who is a gang member is the initiation rite, which usually consists of fighting several other members at the same time or committing a violent crime. Associates, affiliates, and wannabes have not participated in initiation rites; therefore, they are usually excluded from consideration as gang members by law enforcement.

I reject the idea of excluding associates because the only difference between a proclaimed member and a proclaimed associate is self-identification as such. Associates are still a part of the entities known as gangs. Furthermore, my data suggests that self-identification has little relationship to how others perceive the individual and more intriguingly, has no relationship to initiation rites. Other people identifying a person as a part of the gang seemed more relevant in the experience of respondents than initiation rites did. In other words, those who claimed to be associates or affiliates were identified as gang members by other gang members I interviewed. It is important to note that individuals in this study were from different gangs and therefore viewed

other respondents as gang members that may not be considered as such by the gang they were associated with. This would make sense considering the presentation of self. Despite the lack of verbal identification, engagement in gang activity would result in an impression management outcome in which outsiders would view the associate as a gang member (Goffman 1959). Thus, I used the judgment of other gang members as the line of demarcation from non-gang member to gang member.

Fleisher (2002) noticed this demarcation of gang member status in that only 9 out of 54 subjects in the Champaign study participated in initiation rites, yet the uninitiated individuals were still considered gang members. Furthermore, from the ethnography of the Freemont Hustlers, it was determined that membership was synonymous with friendship. Any friend of a member was also considered a member when that friendship became familiar to the other youth in the network (Fleisher 2002). Similarly, the respondents in this study indicated no pattern about when and why initiations occur (see Table 2). Table 2 shows that only 8 out of the 15 respondents participated in an initiation. Although slightly more than half were initiated into a gang, the incidence of initiation becomes more significant when individuals who switched gangs were still only initiated once. From the respondent's answers to questions about who the core members in their gang were, we can use the Sa Town Bloods for comparative purposes. Dj Cast and Kinkaid were both core members but only Dj Cast went through an initiation. Lil' Soldja, Rush, and Scrappy were all peripheral members, yet only Lil' Soldja went through an initiation. This

TABLE 2  
Participation in Initiation Rites

	<i>Member type</i>	<i>Initiation</i>
Dj Cast	Core	Yes
Kinkaid	Core	No
Mama T	Core	No
Lil' Soldja	Peripheral	Yes
Rush	Peripheral	No
Cajun	Core	Yes
T-Note	Peripheral (Dayton St)	No
	Associate (Tray-5-7)	No
Scrappy	Peripheral (B.S.V.)	Yes
	Peripheral (S.T.B.)	No
Shuga	Peripheral (Hoover)	Yes
	Core (Crip Group)	No
Pranx	Associate	No
Balla	Associate	No
Royal	Peripheral (W.S.V.)	Yes
	Associate (BSV/NEV)	No
	Core (B.T.K.-3.G)	No
Azul	Peripheral	Yes
Oso	Core	No
Sleek	Associate (A.B.C.)	No
	Peripheral (A.V.L.)	Yes
	Associate (ESP/Sur 13)	No
	Associate (N.S.A.)	No

finding does not negate the importance or significance of initiation rites (see Vigil 1996), but it does indicate that initiations are not the sole determining factor of who is and who is not a gang member. If an individual participates in gang activity, then they are part of the social network entity known as a gang.

### FLUIDITY OF MEMBERSHIP

An unexpected finding that is relevant to gang definitions is fluidity. None of the respondents indicated any difficulty leaving the gang. The media propagated idea of “blood in-blood out” (having to suffer violence to get in and again to get out) was not supported by any of the respondents in this study. A study done in St. Louis also found that leaving the gang was a relatively easy process, with very few people suffering violence, because the attachment between members lessens the propensity to cause harm to each other and organization was loose (Decker and Lauritsen 2002). Matza (1990) explains that the gang’s main opponent is attrition because of members maturing and drifting back into a legitimate lifestyle. Because of the fallout, gangs espouse an ideology of loyalty and lifelong membership, but the reality is that membership in the subculture is much more likely to be a temporary phase, unless legal sanctions and labeling solidifies a person’s adherence to a criminal lifestyle. (Matza 1990).

A more intriguing finding is that more than half of the respondents in the current study had switched gangs with relative ease. Two of the remaining respondents belonged to gangs that switched their entire allegiance from one alliance to another. *Mama T* was a member of the Lil’ Watts X3 (LWS 13), a Sureno group. Surenos tend to be represented by blue bandanas. When members of the Ambros, a Folk gang that wore baby blue, shot several members of the LWS 13, killing a core member, the LWS 13 switched their representative color to black and allied with the People nation gangs, losing their alliance with gangs represented by blue. The Wheatley Courts, introduced earlier in conjunction with *Pranx*, were Crips until 1994. Then, an East Terrace Gangster (Crip) accompanied by an Altadena Blocc Crip opened fire on a core member of the Wheatley Courts Gangsters killing the little brother of the intended target. Soon after that, the entire Wheatley Court Gangsters changed their name to Wheatley Court Texas and became Bloods. These events are major alliance shifts and illustrate the importance of core members and actions against them.

There is very little literature about the fluidity of membership. However, the Kansas City Police Department made note of the shift away from traditional gang patterns into what they call “hybrid” or “mutant gangs” (Howell et al. 2002). These “hybrid” gangs tend to be the ones that appeared in cities that had no gangs prior to the late 1980s and early 1990s. These gangs have a tendency to mix the gang cultures and symbols of Los Angeles and Chicago groups. The members are more likely to switch gangs, belong to more than one gang, or combine gangs (Howell et al. 2002).

The hybrid gang culture appears to be present in San Antonio from the backgrounds of the respondents (see Tables 3A and 3B). I designated member type from self-identification, and descriptions of participation in violence and criminality, as well as identification with the gang, reasons for joining the gang, and centrality to the overall group. Status as a non-core member is what makes changing gangs easier. All of the members who switched, save one (see below), were either associate or peripheral members. *Dj Cast*, *Shuga*, and *Royal* became core members

TABLE 3A  
Respondents Switched Gangs

	<i>Initial gang</i>	<i>Membership</i>	<i>Switch to</i>	<i>Membership</i>
Dj Cast	Mickey Clan-(Red/People)	Associate	S.T.B. (Red/Blood)	Core
Cajun	D.O.G. (Blue/Crip)	Core	Latin King (Black/People)	Associate
T-Note	Dayton Street (New Jersey)	Peripheral	Tray-Five-Seven (Blue/Crip)	Peripheral
Scrappy	B.S.V. (Red/Blood)	Peripheral	S.T.B. (Red/Blood)	Peripheral
Balla	E.T.G (Blue/Crip)	Associate	D.H.G. (Red/Blood)	Associate
			S.S. Ambro (Lt blue/Folk)	Associate
Shuga	Hoover (Blue/Crip)	Peripheral	Conglomerate Crip group (357, Rolling 60's, Rolling 30's)	Core
Royal	W.S.V. Kingz (Black/People)	Peripheral	B.S.V./N.E.V. (Blood-King)	Associate
			B.T.K./3 G (Black/People)	Core
Sleek	A.B.C. (Blue/Crip)	Associate	Alm. Vice Lord (Maroon/People)	Peripheral
			E.S. Players (Blue/Crip)	Associate
			Sur 13 (Blue/Sureno)	Associate
			N.S. Ambros (Lt. blue/Folk)	Associate

after they switched. Core members did not switch gangs. All of the members that switched did so for non-hostile reasons such as moving or simply choosing another affiliation that they believed would be more beneficial,

Balla: When I was younger I messed with more Crips and when I got older I started messing with Bloods, but when I was older I was more about making money so I chose to hang around the people that were making the most money at the time.

Furthermore, none of the members suffered negative consequences for switching gangs. The notable exception to this pattern is Cajun, a former core member of the Dope Overthrowing Gangster Crips. After being viciously assaulted by the Tray-Five-Seven Crips, Cajun switched affiliations to the Latin Kings, an enemy of the Crips. Other than Cajun's switch due to betrayal, the fact that core members rarely switch reveals the profound identification that core members have with their gang.

TABLE 3B  
Respondents Who did not Switch Gangs

	<i>Gang</i>	<i>Membership</i>
Kinkaid	Sa Town Bloods	Core
Mama T	Lil' Watts X3* (Black/Sureno)	Core
Lil' Soldja	Sa Town Bloods	Peripheral
Rush	Sa Town Bloods	Peripheral
Pranx	Wheatley Courts Gangster* (Blood)	Associate
Azul	107 Hoover Crip (Tulsa, OK)	Peripheral
Oso	Romos Klik (Red/People)	Core

\*These gangs switched allegiances.

## CONCLUSION

The findings in this study have been consistent with previous research. Like Yablonsky (1959) previously found, the respondents in this study indicated that gang members did not have a definition of membership nor a measurable number of members. Consistent with Fleisher's (2002) description of the gang social network, members were often in cliques that included members of other gangs and inclusion in the gang was an arbitrary process. Furthermore, the problem of associate member categorization poses a large problem for gang research and further bolsters Yablonsky (1959) and Fleisher's (2002) argument that the gang should not be considered an organized group. It may be important to define types of gang members as associate members who did not identify as gang members still engaged in all of the same activities that the self-identifying members engaged in. Not acknowledging this component of the gang landscape may lead to an inadequate picture of gang processes.

In several aspects of gang membership processes, the data here portray a fluid social network. The line of demarcation between gang members and associates becomes complicated by evidence that initiation rites are not the sole determining factor regarding inclusion in a gang. Supporting Decker and Lauritsen's (2002) findings, no indications of negative sanctions occurred for individuals who left the gang. Thus, in San Antonio neither joining nor leaving the gang are punctuated by violence, as many have previously believed. The study was conducted on former street gang members only and therefore may have no bearing on prison gangs or outlaw motorcycle clubs. It could also be geographically limited to San Antonio, Texas; however the research done by Fleisher (2002) suggests that these processes are similar in other areas. A unique contribution of these data is the unveiling of gang members switching gangs without negative consequences. This fluid aspect of late-onset gangs needs to be further explored as it may call for a re-evaluation of theoretical and empirical gang investigations.

While far from being definitive, the data in this study have reinforced findings of previous research (Yablonsky 1959; Fleisher 2002) and some intriguing issues for the study of gangs. Furthermore, if the applicability can be extended further to other locations, it is likely to be those areas characterized by late onset gangs (Howell et al. 2002) and not to areas like Chicago and Los Angeles, which have impressive bodies of research concerning gangs in those locales. However, in light of emergent gang problem cities (Spergel and Curry 1990) and late onset gangs (Howell et al. 2002), the gang landscape has changed and this study examines the evolution of gang membership processes within these contexts.

This study contributes to the sociological literature on gangs by pointing out the fluidity of gang membership in an emerging gang problem city. Gang members in the study switched gangs with relative ease and initiation rites did not always delineate membership status. The ease of switching gangs, suggests that gang member status is transferable, somewhat like a professor's tenure. Indeed, many of the members who switched gangs attained a more profound status in the subsequent gang than they had in the previous gang. These contributions suggest that the examination of gang membership processes have evolved and are in need of further study beyond the traditional quantitative procedures that characterize much of the current literature. This research indicates that traditional ways of viewing gangs may now be inadequate. Rather than previously held assumptions of strong loyalty to the gang, it appears that the individualism in broader society has trickled down to the gang arena, and that an individual's gang status is more important than the overall gang. There are many implications from the research. Law enforcement

preoccupation with the belief of solid organizational structures of gangs seems to be more irrelevant and inaccurate, as the gang member's affiliation and status appears much more amorphous and adaptable. The validity of accepted standardized gang definitions are also called into question concerning cities with late-onset gangs. More qualitative and social network studies at street level such as the work of Fleisher (2002) and Papachristos (2006) are needed to determine whether older standardized perceptions of gangs are still valid, if we are dealing with a gang evolution, or if we were simply wrong all along.

The traditional acceptance of initiation rites as the line of demarcation for gang member status was also not supported by the current data. Beyond initiation and self-identification, the "situated self" (Hewitt 1988) may also be pertinent to the concept of inclusion in the gang arena. Future research may further examine the complexities created by associate/affiliate members who "acted" like gang members but claimed to not be gang members. The associate/affiliate category seems to be a throwaway word for people who do not fit traditional definitions of gang members. This category dangerously ignores the actual contribution of the associate/affiliate to the gang landscape and how other gang members view them. The issues of the associate/affiliate as well as the other findings in this study suggest that modern definitions of gang members need to take the fluid aspect of inclusion and switching gang allegiances into account. It is apparent that gangs have evolved and gang research needs to evolve with it.

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