

NEWS THEMES AND ETHNIC IDENTITY: *LOS ANGELES TIMES* NEWS REPORTS OF VIETNAMESE, BLACK, AND HISPANIC GANGS

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ABSTRACT

The news media and popular culture inform public perceptions of social problems and issues. This paper examines how Vietnamese, black, and Hispanic gang activities are presented by *Los AngelesTimes* reporters. Qualitative content analysis of a theoretical sample of reports over a several year period indicates that Vietnamese youthful offenses are more likely to be “explained” by references to cultural context, traditions, and generational conflicts, while Hispanic and black offenses are more likely to include references to individual pathologies, drugs, and cultural disorganization. These findings are interpreted within an organizational production framework, including the use of entertainment and media formats that are informed by audience preferences and assumptions. It is further suggested that journalists, as participants in popular culture, reflect common cul-tural preferences as suggested by social distance literature.

Perspectives on Social Problems, Volume 11, pages 85-103.

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ISBN: 0-7623-0481-2

INTRODUCTION

Public perceptions of social problems are influenced by the mass media, particularly by news reports (Shaw and McCombs 1977). The structure and organization of newswork influences the tone and emphasis of news reports about all aspects of social order, particularly crime and justice (Altheide 1976, 1995; Fishman 1980; Ferrell and Sanders 1995; Surette 1998). However, journalists draw on a broad background and context of information, including cultural expectations, assumptions, and preferences, which may be expressed as stereotypes. Work on news media reports about racial and ethnic groups further suggests that journalists' perceptions inform their products (McCarthy et al. 1997). Journalists, after all, are also audience members of a pervasive popular culture. When different meanings and assumptions are associated with various group memberships, then reporting emphasis and language about such groups may also differ, and public perceptions and social policy may also be influenced. The empirical challenge is to first discover whether and to what extent different minority groups are featured in news reports. This paper examines how selected news coverage of Vietnamese youth crime differs in substantial ways from that of Hispanic and Black youth crime.

THE NEWS MEDIA AND PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS

Several decades of work demonstrate a link between the mass media and public perceptions of issues and problems (cf. Snow 1983; Altheide and Snow 1991; Comstock 1980; Hirsch 1980; Skogan and Maxfield 1981; Sparks 1992; Katz 1987). From this perspective, the mass media play a large role in shaping public agendas by influencing what people think about (MacKuen and Coombs 1981; Iyengar and Kinder 1987, p. 113).

The focus on the processes, practices, and perspectives of newswriters has clarified how an organized production process shapes news reports, as well as other entertainment oriented programs (cf. Altheide 1976; Fishman 1980; Tuchman 1978). A key part of this process, is the development and use of "formats," or the way of selecting, organizing and presenting information, shape audience assumptions and preferences for certain kinds of information (Altheide 1985; Meyrowitz 1985; Altheide and Snow 1991; Ericson et al. 1991). The relevance for audiences and social activities turns on the way such formats come to be learned, taken for granted, and expected. For example, when people interact with certain formats over a long period of time, they expect and assume that events and issues will have a certain look, a "proper media look" (Altheide and Snow 1991). A similar point can be made about mass media depictions of minority group members as criminals.

The way in which popular culture and news formats can accommodate different stereotypes and notions of crime-as-group-identity has not been widely explored, although a body of research documents how minority groups are often depicted as

criminals and suggests various implications this may have for public perceptions and social policies, including stricter enforcement guidelines (cf. Sloan 1996; Kirkhorn 1996). For example, McCarthy et al. (1997) argue that popular films about inner city violence employ,

a semiotic loop in which filmic realism participates in and colludes with TV evening news and mainstream, cinema in the formation of suburban resentment by presenting the inner city as a place of violence and lost dreams (p. 274).

McCarthy et al.'s (1997, p. 274) review of efforts to "marginalize popular culture" as a significant contributor to race relations argues that it is through popular culture that racial identities and interests are constructed, reworked, and integrated into public perceptions, as well as the school life of young people. Focusing on films and television, for example, Denzin (1997) notes that,

The contemporary history of U.S. race relations is, in large part, a history of the representation of violent, youthful minority group members in mainstream Hollywood... [selected films] can be read as modernist realist ethnographic texts, stories and narrative histories that privilege whiteness, and an assimilation-acculturation approach to the race relations problem".

Others have argued that the, the issue of "crime reporting" becomes joined with questions drawn from dramaturgical analysis: "what does crime look like?" If the nature of crime reporting is partly a feature of certain status characteristics of alleged offenders in addition to a particular "criminal a&," then membership has social relevance for news and social control (Ericson et al. 1989).

In sum, it has been established that news and popular culture depictions of minority groups as different and often as criminal is a function of cultural assumptions and stereotypes, as well as organizational processes of news work. However, if such processes are indeed contextual and emergent over time, perhaps changing with dominant group and newswriters' assumptions about and experiences with various minority groups, then we would expect there to be differences at any point in time in media depictions of minority group characteristics and putative explanations and disclaimers for relevant conduct.

METHODOLOGY

This work is the continuation of a qualitative approach referred to as "tracking discourse," or following certain issues, words, themes, and frames over a period of time, across different issues, and across different news media (Altheide 1996, 1997). This phase of the project analyzed *Los Angeles Times* (LAT) accounts of Vietnamese gang activity between 1985 and 1996. As part of a project that initially focused on news reports of fear among Vietnamese immigrants, the data revealed news interest in "home invasions" by Vietnamese youth. But the way in which the

reports were written, stressing certain cultural contexts of the offenders, suggested an emphasis uncharacteristic of reports about “gang activities.”

The *Los Angeles Times* was selected for this phase of the project for several reasons: (1) California, and especially the Los Angeles area, includes the largest and most diverse array of youth gangs in the United States; (2) it is one of the major newspapers in the United States; (3) this is the major center for popular culture in the United States; and (4) comprehensive newspaper records were available on the Lexis/Nexis information base.

Comparing how news coverage treats Vietnamese youthful criminal activities with that of other groups reveals a discourse of inclusion for social values attributed to “Asian” cultures that is denied to certain other ethnic groups. For example, articles that covered the arrest or sentencing of young Vietnamese gangsters frequently mentioned that the individual apprehended had also been an excellent, promising scholar as these examples suggest:

‘We’ll hear that an Asian gang member is arrested for home invasion, and then realize that the kid is a straight-A student,’ said Sherry Jones, principal at Stacey Intermediate School (*Los Angeles Times* July 5, 1995).

‘Unlike their African American or Latino counterparts, many Asian gang members come from middle-class homes and attend good schools,’ authorities say (*Los Angeles Times* January 25, 1996).

Articles such as these accounts illustrate how we integrated knowledge of the research literature on the mass media and popular culture with an awareness of the Lexis/Nexis information base (see below) and a qualitative content analysis framework (Altheide 1996). For example, the surprise value in the examples comes not from the matter of a crime committed. Rather, we are surprised because the perpetrator is an “A” student and an Asian American. Culturally, popular views and those of journalists as well, may come to expect Asians to be scholastic achievers. In “conventional wisdom,” cultural scripts do not typically associate Asians with criminal activity. On the other hand, numerous studies indicate that popular culture and widespread assumptions do not include expectations that Hispanics or blacks will excel in school. Nor is it a popular culture rarity when their names appear in police reports.

Similar observations led us to recast our conceptual net, and ultimately, our topic and sampling approach. Our focus shifted to a comparative analysis of news coverage of Vietnamese and other minority (that is, black and Hispanic) gangs. Examining the specific news reports from a broader context of knowledge about news formats and media logic suggested that certain “causal themes” were appearing in these reports. Embedded in the widely used “problem frame” (Altheide 1997) that defines American journalism, “causal terms” reflect popular and highly simplified views of complex issues (see Table 1). Accordingly, we conducted a qualitative media analysis of theoretically sampled newspaper articles that met

Table 1. Explanatory Terms in LAT Coverage of Ethnic Youth Crime

Vietnamese Explanatory Terms

1985	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "people come here without families" "nothing to do" "nobody controls them" "dim memories of a violent homeland" "relative freedom of American friends" "want to be equal, accept" "parents need kids, can't discipline" "modeling after American cowboy" "imitate too much TV"
1986	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "gangs of military and police veterans" "many are orphans" "adjustment to freer life not easy" "adjustment brings conflict with parents" "resentment from American born students" "friction from differences in culture" "without parents, have lack of stability" "parents don't speak English; don't know how kids are doing"
1987	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "young, jobless and vicious" "violence is only lifestyle they knew" "bad apples" "perception of slow, loose, and inconsistent American legal system" "take advantage of embedded Asian sentimentalities" "quite a few of these youths are without families" "they don't have the support system that was there in the family"
1988	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "living with single parents or guardians or on their own" "arrive after losing one or both parents in war" "if they don't have supervision they have nobody to foster education" "highly motivated to get money, power and prestige" "increase in use of drugs in the SE Asian community" "victims of war" "single parent homes" "their on their own" "juveniles feel they can get off easy" "lost, confused young men torn between two cultures" "education's disrupted, families fragmented" "feelings of rootlessness, and alienation" "encounter an English-speaking world that glorifies power and material wealth" "unprepared for culture conflicts"
1992	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "usually there's conflict between parents and children" "young people quickly get involved in American society" "parents keep to the old culture" "some of the children don't have parents" "parent's who can't help them with schoolwork" "influx of Amerasians who are uneducated, unemployable" "good education, yet drift into gangs through peer pressure and boredom"

(continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

<i>Vietnamese Explanatory Terms</i>	
1995	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "high achieving students seek the thrills, acceptance, power and possessions" "some have estranged or distant relationships with parents" "feel misunderstood at school" "emotional support is weak" "listens more to his friends than his family" "I wanted the respect and name of a gang" "get girls and respect and drive good cars" "I couldn't turn to my own family for help" "the gang seemed like they would be there for me"
1996	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "parents don't even know their kids are involved" "the kids are looking for excitement and sense of belonging" "eastern emphasis on family and western focus on the individual" "a lot of pressure and confusion" "you lose your extended family when you arrive in America" "gangs take the place of family"
<i>Black/Hispanic Explanatory Terms</i>	
1985	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "indifference by elected officials, school administrators, police, to do anything" "raised on a monthly welfare check, mostly without a man in the house" "proliferation of drugs makes gangs more appealing for teenagers" "narcotics can be quick way for a member to make a buck" "you get a whole lot of respect" "low income neighborhoods" "all the ingredients—poverty poor housing, unemployment, one-parent families" "little emphasis on education" "gangs fill a void" "provide friendship, recognition, excitement, protection, and money" "people have respect for you when you're in a gang"
1987	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "these are not kids who have gone astray; these are bad people" "much of the problem stems from parents who are also gang members" "as long as they are bringing dope money home and sharing with the family"
1989	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "profits from cocaine give gangs more to fight over than just turf" "at the center of every gang is a hardcore group of troublemakers" "get the losers off the street and you reduce the odds that others will cause trouble"
1991	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "kids drift toward gangs" "organizations like the Crips and the Bloods are the only option" "there is no little league in Watts" "there are no programs" "in many cases the gang is a surrogate family" "it offers love, a sense of welcome" "it offers rules, regulations, empowerment"
1992	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "peer pressure, adolescent rebellion, an abiding fascination with gang culture" "a lack of supervision by working parents" "children are drawn to gangs because they reject their parents' values" "parents lose touch, fail to monitor their activities" "reject their privileged status" "prefer to adopt what they see as the earthier and grittier lives of the underclass" "gang life glorified in films, music videos and popular dress"

(continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Black/Hispanic Explanatory Terms	
1993	"steeped in a separatist mentality from years behind bars" "many of our young people think they have to be a gang member to be Chicano" "nobody is creating opportunities" "gangs sell drugs to make money" "Kids from the poorer neighborhoods are at risk" "the gang is the family" "we help each other" "a long history of substance abuse"
1996	"primary recruitment targets are immigrant youngsters" "recruiter says he scouts middle schools for kids on the fringe of gang life" "make unsteady targets believe he is their friend, protector" "promises action and excitement" "I tell them you can get guns and drugs... you get women" "it Looks glamorous"
1997	"parent not there for kids.. in and out of prison" "drug money opens up a world of luxury" "it had to do with drugs and uninvolved parents" "members jobless, without cars" "relied on the gang to pay bills"

pled newspaper articles that met certain criteria (Glaser and Strauss (1967). The exploratory study relied on the Lexis/Nexis information bases to gather a sample of newspaper articles, which reported on the nature, characteristics, actions, causes, and situations of Vietnamese gangs and their members. This information base permits specific "Boolean" searches for certain words or phrases within "X words" of another search term (e.g., "Vietnamese w/15 gang"). Moreover, the information base is highly interactive, permitting the researchers to explore "words" and concepts suggested from an initial article or two to thousands of documents in order to refine further the comparisons.

Several steps are used in qualitative media analysis (cf. Altheide 1996) to permit systematic and conceptually informed emphasis and selection of articles for analysis, as well as for key terms, topics, and themes. Relevant questions we sought to answer included: Do reports include references to the act (e.g., a robbery) or to the individual and social characteristics of the accused or "suspects," including group membership, cultural history, and other contextual information that provides an interpretive framework for a particular behavior? In general, as the above comments suggest, the process is "emergent," in that an initial reading of several articles is followed by a detailed appraisal of fit with a draft of a research protocol, which in turn leads to selection of other articles for analysis and "test" to ascertain that the most cogent search terms are employed so that significant formulations in articles are not missed.

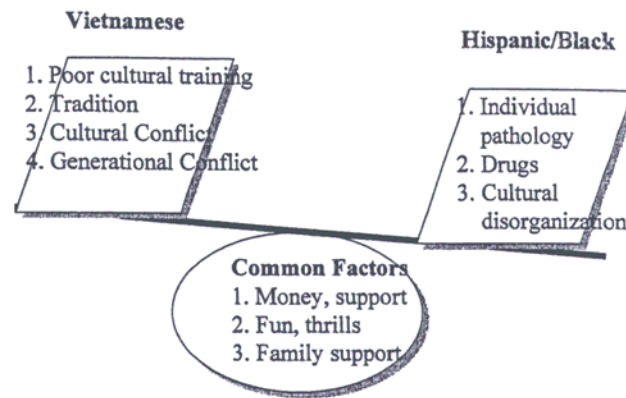


Figure 1. Themes in News Coverage of Vietnamese and Hispanic and Black Gang Activities

Following guidelines for qualitative media analysis, the initial articles were analyzed for foci and thematic emphases suggesting explanations or assessments for Vietnamese gang activity. These theoretical samples were selected for significant comparisons and contrasts (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The very nature of the research necessitated the specification of a search restriction to include only articles that dealt with causal explanations, the appropriate ethnic groups, and the desired time period. Twenty articles about Vietnamese gangs were more carefully examined for thematic emphasis. These were then compared with a dozen articles on black and Hispanic gangs.

Relevant articles were downloaded from Lexis/Nexis into a word-processing format on a personal computer. These materials were then coded in the text, and additional data were obtained with a protocol as noted above and as suggested by Altheide's (1996) guidelines for qualitative media analysis.

THE FINDINGS

After reviewing a number of these articles, it became apparent that media treatment of Vietnamese gangs was quite different from coverage of other youth gangs, such as black and Hispanic, or Latino, groups. It also became clear that the qualities attributed to Vietnamese gangsters changed over a period of years (see Table 1) and are reflected in "causal themes" that include terms and phrases that

pervade popular culture as acceptable accounts of very complex processes. Moreover, such phrases are attributed to certain groups and not others. Briefly tracking the change of news coverage of Vietnamese gangs reveals a continuation of family context themes originating in 1985, with added dimensions of the drug war, pursuit of youthful “excitement,” folded into an indictment of an “easy criminal justice system.” Figure 1, which supplements Table 1, illustrates some of the differences and similarities in news coverage of the three groups’ activities.

At first, explanations focused on culture conflict and loss of family during emigration to the United States:

People come here without families. Nothing to do, you know; they live with friends, they live with an uncle, nobody controls them... they find it difficult to understand the strict behavioral codes that their families demand when confronted with the relative freedom of their American friends (*Los Angeles Times* November 25, 1985).

Later, during the late 1980s, attributions centered more frequently, but not exclusively, on lack of supervision and problems in school:

“Very few have parents here,” Do said. “If they don’t have the supervision, they wind up in limbo with nobody to foster education” (*Los Angeles Times* April 4, 1988).

Finally, in the mid-1990s, news reports began to focus on the things that gangs offered youth who participated:

Many high-achieving students are drawn into gangs because they seek the thrills, acceptance, power and material possessions that good grades don’t always bring (*Los Angeles Times* July 5, 1995).

Although reports of Vietnamese gangs often portrayed members as the casualties of war, culture conflict, shattered families, and the language barrier, it seemed that gang members of other ethnicities were more likely to be labeled troublemakers, drug dealers, and violent hustlers in search of a quick buck. With this perceived difference, two important questions arise. First, why does this perceived difference appear? Second, can it be documented? The remainder of our remarks focus on illustrating that such a difference in coverage of youth gangs does exist. However, before turning to that task, we will deal briefly with some ideas on why such groups would be treated in separate fashion.

ESTABLISHING A DIFFERENCE

According to the reports, Vietnamese gangs began to draw attention from the authorities, citizens, and educators during the mid-1980s. We examined articles through 1996. To illustrate that a qualitative difference exists in coverage of Vietnamese gangs versus black or Hispanic gangs, it was necessary to review articles

dealing with other ethnic gangs from the same time period. Again, using the Lexis/Nexis information bases, a theoretical sample (Altheide 1996) of articles was drawn from the those available in the *Los Angeles Times* (1985 to 1997).

Reviewing the materials made it apparent that while some causal explanations for behavior were similar for both groups, other explanations were more frequently attributed to Vietnamese gangsters or alternately to Hispanic and black gang members. We suggest that the former tend to be cast as victims of either a troubled history or problematic social situation involving difficult adjustments, while the latter are cast more in terms of individual pathologies surviving in fractured communities, perhaps beyond repair. Let us begin with the Vietnamese case.

It is perhaps unavoidable that many explanations of Vietnamese gang behavior are related to the American war in Vietnam and the subsequent and sudden exodus of many Vietnamese to the United States beginning in 1975. Some scholars, law enforcement officials, and educators note that violence is the only lifestyle some young immigrants knew before coming to the United States:

Growing up with dim memories of a violent homeland and a culture often disturbingly at odds with their own, a new generation of Vietnamese youngsters may have trouble reconciling the real warfare of their memories with the make-believe warfare they see on television.. (*Los Angeles Times*, November 25, 1985).

Most Vietnamese refugees came to America seeking an end to violence, but many of these youngsters came with the only life style they knew. As orphans or part of war-separated families, they started running in child gangs in Vietnam for sheer survival (*Los Angeles Times*, February 15, 1987).

Some even believe that Vietnamese gangs developed from groups of former South Vietnamese soldiers who used their military associations to profit in the United States:

Lt. John Robertson, a spokesman for the Garden Grove Police Department in Orange County, said the character of the Vietnamese gangs has changed over the years, from tightly organized, insignia-wearing groups of former military men to more amorphous and mobile groups of teen-agers..(*Los Angeles Times*, January 21, 1986),

Another explanation related to America's involvement in Southeast Asia is the number of children without adequate supervision. Since 1975, thousands of Vietnamese families have fled to the United States to escape persecution and reprisal at the hands of the communists. Many, if not most of those families, arrived fragmented, having lost one or both parents to the war, pirates in the Gulf of Thailand, or economic difficulty. The resulting number of single-parent families has been listed as a cause for much Vietnamese gang behavior as the following examples will attest:

Such gang members, they said, arrive here in their early teens, their educations disrupted, their families fragmented, and their aspirations replaced by feelings of rootlessness and alienation (*Los Angeles Times*, August 5, 1990).

"Quite a few of these youths are without families, and they don't have the support system that was always there in the family," said Ngoan Le, executive director of the Vietnam Assn. of Illinois...(*Los Angeles Times*, February 15, 1987).

Another set of explanations offered in the *Los Angeles Times* accounts deals with the conflicts between American and Vietnamese culture. Alternately, this sort of discussion is less frequently observed in reports on other ethnic gangs. Perhaps it is presumed that other groups have been in the United States long enough to have assimilated; that as a result others do not suffer the same sorts of stresses. Whatever the reasoning, these Vietnamese cultural explanations take three basic forms. The first involves the relative freedom of American society.

Often, they find it difficult to understand the strict behavioral codes that their families demand when confronted with the relative freedom of their American friends (*Los Angeles Times*, November 25, 1985).

Sherr said that, as a group, Vietnamese students understand that "success lies in getting a good education." But, he added, for some of the students, the adjustment to the freer, more independent American way of life has not been easy, and has led to conflict with parents, antisocial behavior and trouble with the law (*Los Angeles Times*, January 21, 1986).

Second, conflicts arise when Vietnamese students embrace American individualism contrary to their parents' wishes:

Straddling two often clashing cultures—Eastern emphasis on the family and Western focus on the individual—young immigrants feel a lot of pressure and confusion too... (*Los Angeles Times*, January 25, 1996).

Problems arise, experts say, because many Asian students adopted American beliefs after coming to the United States, while their parents adhere to traditional Asian customs. They say some high-achieving students have estranged or distant relationships with parents and feel unwelcome or misunderstood at school (*Los Angeles Times*, July 5, 1995).

When they come into contact with American society, the notion of class disappears, and they feel they can do anything they want very quickly to become rich (*Los Angeles Times*, February 15, 1987).

A third causal explanation spins off from the second. Often, older parents or grandparents who remain focused on traditional Vietnamese customs do not integrate well into the American community. They may stay in largely Vietnamese or Southeast Asian enclaves within larger cities and rely on their children, who have an easier time adapting, to help them conduct any necessary outside business. As

a result, parents may not feel free to criticize or control their children who are their only link within the larger English-speaking society:

"I usually see the situation where parents, they don't speak very good English, so the kids just like the head of household," she said. "So if parents need to communicate with someone, they need the kids to communicate for them. So the kids just like, 'I'm better than you are now. You're not as good as you should be?' The parents, they're confused, they're frustrated, they say, 'How can I discipline my kids?'" (*Los Angeles Times*, November 25, 1985)

Having reviewed these accounts, it is clear that explanations of Vietnamese youth gang involvement center on cultural and situational factors, such as a violent background of war, relative freedom of American society, families torn apart by circumstance, and conflict between Vietnamese and American traditions. Alternatively, explanations of gang behavior of other ethnic groups seem to focus on individual pathologies of the members' families or the members themselves. In this section, we again utilize examples taken from *Los Angeles Times* articles to illustrate several categories of explanations given for Hispanic or black gang activity. The first of these posits that such kids are simply bad kids or hardcore troublemakers:

These are not kids who have gone astray," he said. "These are bad people. "They will rob you, they will kill you and they will burglarize your homes" (*Los Angeles Times*, January 11, 1987).

...at the center of every gang is a hard core of troublemakers. Get these losers off the street and you reduce the odds that other members of the clique will cause trouble (*Los Angeles Times*, September 25, 1989).

Second, drugs play a vital role in explanations of black and Hispanic gang activity. At one level, critics argue that kids become involved in gangs because they get hooked on drugs; at another, kids are believed to get involved in the drug trade because they are after easy money.

The proliferation of drugs has made gangs all the more appealing for many teenagers, police said. Selling narcotics can be a quick way for an enterprising young gang member to make a buck. The following examples elucidate the situation:

Most of them are users," said Sgt. urn Sutton of the police narcotics division. "There's a lot of use of PC? and heroin among Hispanic gangs, a lot of use of rock cocaine among the Black gang members" (*Los Angeles Times*, December 1, 1985).

I know a lot of guys who aren't doing anything but selling drugs trying to make money.. (*Los Angeles Times*, March 12, 1995).

Similarly, drug money is seen as part of the package used to lure potential gangsters into the group:

With their resistance eroded, he (gang recruiter) promises action and excitement as part of the regions largest street gang. "I tell them you can get guns and drugs." (*Los Angeles times*, November 17, 1996).

A third explanation for black and Hispanic gang involvement is a youngster's desire for respect and prestige. Authors of the articles posit that in some of the more problematic neighborhoods, families and peers value neither scholastic achievement nor athletic prowess. Instead, the gangs provide easy access to wealth, prestige, and respect:

"You're never worried about nobody too fast to do something to you. They hear I'm in a gang, they think, 'I'm not going to deal with him or he'll come shoot up my sister or blow up my house.' So mostly, you just get a whole lot of respect" (*Los Angeles times*, December 1, 1985).

Finally, the reporters argue, gangs provide excitement and activity in neighborhoods where there is little else going on and little opportunity for advancement:

Kids drift toward gangs. Organizations like the Crips and the Bloods are the only option. There is no Little League in Watts. There are no programs. Those streets are stultifying. And there's no way for kids to get out their natural aggression (*Los Angeles times*, August 27, 1991).

Ortiz, who grew up in Lincoln Heights with a reputation as a kid who was quick to get into a fight, believes only Chicanos will truly help Chicano's. "Nobody is creating opportunities. We're the only ones who care enough to do something..." (*Los Angeles times*, March 12, 1995).

COMMON EXPLANATIONS

In general, Vietnamese gangsters are depicted as victims of cultural and wartime conflict, while black and Hispanic kids who engage in gang activity are portrayed as pathological individuals, drug dealers, and malingerers looking for a cheap thrill. While the data suggest that news articles offer different explanations for gang behavior for different ethnic groups, there are also some common frameworks associated with youth criminality in general and ethnic youth in particular. Such similarities are often found in reports of what gang life offers the members involved.

For example, in each case, gang membership is purported to provide certain things, such as money, girls, cars, and other material possessions that gang kids want. In black and Hispanic neighborhoods,

Gangs fill a void for many youths, giving them friendship, recognition, excitement, protection, and money (*Los Angeles times*, December 1, 1995).

The drug money opened up a world of luxury to the boys. They were too young to own cars so they filled their closets with Reeboks and adorned their girlfriends with gold (*Los Angeles Times*, May 27, 1997).

Similarly, newspaper accounts report that Vietnamese youngsters often participate in gang activities because of similar goals. One suggestion is that,

Many high-achieving students are drawn into gangs because they seek the thrills, acceptance, power and material possessions that good grades don't always bring (*Los Angeles Times*, July 5, 1995).

Out on the streets, they encounter an English-speaking world that glorifies power and material wealth:

They want very much to be like American kids...But that usually means money to go to a dance or out for a drink—money that their parents don't have, or if they do, they won't allow them to use in those ways (*Los Angeles Times*, August 5, 1990).

It is not only the quest for material possessions and money that appear as a common explanation of Vietnamese, black, and Hispanic behavior. In each case, the gang is attributed with providing a sort of surrogate family to replace one that may be missing parents or one that may be characterized by strained parent-child relationships. The youths, whether Vietnamese or of other ethnic backgrounds, appear to provide support in the form of sympathy and understanding. When sources either claim or are presumed to have “personal” or member knowledge of these effects, the attributed views seem more credible. One person discussed the Vietnamese context,

“For some, gangs have taken the place of an extended family,” said Ernie Takemoto, a Los Angeles County probation officer who has worked with gangs for eight years. “They find solace and comfort in the gangs,” he said (*Los Angeles Times*, January 25, 1996).

“I joined a gang because things were tense with my own family,” said the young man, who was released from prison last year and did not want to be identified because he still fears members of his former gang. “I couldn't turn to my own family for help, and the gang seemed like they would be there for me” (*Los Angeles Times*, July 5, 1995).

Similarly, narratives regarding black and Hispanic youth suggest that many gang members experience problems in their own families. The gang family provides acceptance that may be lacking at home. Two further accounts report,

In many cases, the gang is a surrogate family. It offers love, a sense of welcome. It offers rules, regulations and ultimately empowerment. These kids are completely disenfranchised and without power (*Los Angeles Times*, August 27, 1991).

"I've gotten to the point where I know the good side and the bad side. To me the gang is the family. We help each other..." (*Los Angeles Times*, March 12, 1995).

In brief, then, while many explanations differ in their causal attributions, some common factors are identified.

DISCUSSION: SOCIAL DISTANCE AND THE NEWS MEDIA

As we examined the selected news coverage of Vietnamese and other ethnic gang behavior, it became clear that the explanations offered differed along ethnic guidelines. While Vietnamese gang activities frequently were explained as the result of war, broken family structures, and cultural conflict, the activities of other gangs were not so sympathetically construed. Black and Hispanic gang members were more often portrayed as hard core troublemakers, youths into drugs and looking for a cheap thrill.

A possible explanation for these perceived differences involves social distance, a concept first developed in 1924 by Robert Park as "a mechanism for reducing to measurable terms the amount of understanding and intimacy which characterized personal and social relations" (Owen, Eisner, and McFaul 1981, p. 81). However, most credit is given to Emory Bogardus, who first developed a scale to measure the concept and who conducted studies in 1926, 1946, 1956, and 1966. Bogardus recognized that:

...feelings of distance between members of different ethnic and racial groups are deeply ingrained in collective sentiments, and that one should not expect such feelings to be easily or quickly altered (Owen, Eisner, and McFaul, 1981, p. 85).

Utilizing this concept, we might hypothesize that newspaper accounts portray black or Hispanic gang members more negatively than Vietnamese gang members because there exists a greater ingrained social distance, on the part of Americans—and the journalists who attempt to write for them—toward the former than toward the latter. If such is the case, academic research should report that respondents experience a larger feeling of social distance from African Americans and Hispanic Americans than they experience towards Vietnamese Americans. We will consider the broader category Asian American, as the literature seldom distinguishes Vietnamese from Asian American. There is little reason to believe that this group will draw responses significantly different than would the Vietnamese.

In 1977, Owen, Eisner, and McFaul (1981) undertook to replicate the original studies by Emory Bogardus. Using a sample of 1,488 students from 12 colleges and universities, the authors asked respondents to rate 30 different ethnic groups on a scale from one to seven. One denoted the greatest acceptance while seven marked the greatest social distance. Whites received an average score of 1.25; blacks, 2.03; Mexican Americans, 2.17; Japanese Americans, 2.18; Chinese, 2.29; and Koreans,

2.63. Thus, in this case, the data do not support the hypothesis that blacks and Hispanic Americans experience a greater social distance than do Asian Americans. In fact, the numbers suggest just the opposite. Although the reasons for the differences in the findings are not clear, it may be that the respondents in the 1977 replication, college students, were more open to blacks and Hispanics than were the respondents in the 1990 study.

In another study, Smith (1990) utilized data from the General Social Survey at the National Opinion Research Center in Chicago to measure what he calls ethnic images of whites, Jews, blacks, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Southern whites. Respondents (no number is given) were asked to rate each of the ethnic groups on wealth, work ethic, violence, intelligence, dependency, and patriotism. Examining scores that summed all items, Smith found that in comparison to whites, Jews rated a $+7.5$, while Asian Americans received a (-2.65) . Hispanic Americans scored an average of (-5.70) , and blacks were rated at (-6.29) . (Smith 1990, p. 4) This case then appears to support our hypothesis of greater social distance for blacks and Hispanics than for Asian Americans.

We have used the concept of social distance to suggest that perhaps many Americans feel less distanced from Asian Americans than from blacks or Hispanics. Or, at least, journalists may perceive this to be the case. The research conducted by Smith (1990) seems to support this proposition, while that performed by Owen, Eisner, and McFaul (1981) appears to refute such an argument. After reviewing other studies it becomes clear that while a great degree of social distance appears among different ethnic groups, that distance varies according to the subject and the context of difference. For example, in an examination of social distance feelings among blacks, Yoon (1993) finds that Hispanic Americans are seen as least desirable in trait characteristics, residential integration, and intergroup marriage, while Asian Americans occupy an intermediate position. Alternatively, in a survey of Americans living along the Gulf Coast and in California, Roberts (1988) reports that 77 percent of respondents would disapprove of a Vietnamese refugee marrying into their family, and 11 percent would exclude Indo-Chinese refugees from the country. Examining the development of the Chicano gang crisis in Phoenix, Arizona, Katz (1987) suggests that a "moral panic" arose around a structure of social, economic, and political relations based on the imagery of Chicanos as different and violent. Again, the social distance perceived is directly related to the situational context.

As we see in reporting on Vietnamese gangsters, many activities are tempered against frames of cultural or situational difficulties. Thus, we see accounts that identify a "model minority" of hard-working, education-valuing Asian families contrasted with the gang-plagued Chinatown or Little Saigon (Lee 1994). Tran (1996) notes that the mainstream media continues to project Vietnamese students as either high achievers or gang affiliated. Ultimately, Vietnamese gang activity is surprising because it is not what we come to expect from the "model minority." In contrast, black and Hispanic youths do not have the benefit of this legitimized "frame" as the "model minority." There is less to explain because Americans and the media

do not identify these groups with strong families with a focus on educational achievement. Rather, as Katz (1987) maintains, a view of Mexicans and Chicanos as different has helped to create a threat of disorder.

Given this difference in assumptions about various ethnic groups in American society, it may be necessary to examine how Asian Americans have come to gain the status of the “model minority.” Fong (1991) relates that in the nineteenth century, the Chinese were one of the most despised ethnic groups. That began to change only in the 1920s, and not until the 1940s did they emerge fully as the “model minority.”

CONCLUSION

News reports are reflexive of their organizational and ideological contexts. Mass media reports clearly do not reflect an objective reality, but given the market context—they must be sold to readers—such reports cannot stray too far from perceptions of reality held by audiences. Far from being uniform in depictions of ethnic group contexts for providing audiences with explanatory accounts of crime and deviance, the *Los Angeles Times* made subtle distinctions in the relevance of varied group membership. Thus, news reports are reflexive of cultural contexts and the ideology from which they spring. Such reports are also reflexive of organizational practices for relying on institutional news sources and drawing on prevailing frames and scenarios for communicating with readers. However, public perceptions are also informed by news reports. It is the nexus between “what we believe” and “what we read” (and in the cases of television news and movies, what “we see”) that provides considerable conceptual and methodological challenges for students of the mass media, social problems, and social change. This project explores part of this “space” by looking at how accounts of juvenile gangs and violence are framed by the news media.

Our research design was informed by these considerations. In particular, we were interested in how ostensibly “essentially” similar behavior (e.g., gang, violence and drugs) by different ethnic membership might be reported. Would any distinctions be made, for example, in motives attributed to members, their blameworthiness, and so on, and would this vary according to ethnicity? Contrasting news coverage of Asian American “gang activity,” particularly Vietnamese gangs, with that of black and Hispanic gangs afforded a unique research opportunity. Thus, while all three groups—Asians, Hispanics and blacks—are far from “accepted” and “totally assimilated” into American life, the former seems to be further along in terms of public perceptions than Hispanics and blacks. Research suggests that, on the one hand, Asian Americans are viewed by many as at least a “quasimodel” minority known for strong family values, high achievement, and rapid social mobility, while on the other hand, Hispanics and blacks are ranked much lower on these dimensions.

Qualitative analysis of news reports over a 12-year period in the *Los Angeles Times* coverage of Vietnamese, Hispanic, and black gangs and crime reveals subtle but consistent differences in emphases. Notwithstanding claims by those who have not investigated news reports that racial identities essentially are presented as contrasts to “whiteness” (Giroux 1997), we found marked dissimilarity. Whether the Vietnamese fit in with stereotypes of model minorities, it is clear from this exploratory work that they are treated differently in news reports about juvenile delinquency than other minorities. Vietnamese and Asian youth tend to be treated as victims, undergoing troublesome cultural adjustments, often because of cultural clashes from their “homeland,” but also with generational conflicts involving their parents’ preferences for “traditions” wrapped in native language and customs. At the same time, the evolving nature of explanations for Vietnamese gang activity suggest that public perceptions of Vietnamese people and family may be changing over time and according to circumstance. Further, Vietnamese suspects were given the benefit of prevalent assumptions concerning Asian American families, which are not so readily accorded other “nonmodel” minorities. Vietnamese gang members’ behavior must be “explained” by the above factors because it is not what the public has come to expect from Asians. Alternately, Hispanics and black gang members and activities, particularly violent ones, are often cast as a reflection of individual pathologies, devoid of significant explanatory context, other than the socially disorganized communities in which they survive. There is no need to “explain” such behavior because it is what the public has come to expect.

Interestingly, Vietnamese, black, and Hispanic gang members are all presented as benefiting from gang activities by gaining those things which they are presumed to lack, including money, peer support, respect, fun, and thrills, as well as the family connections denied them, albeit for different reasons, according to news reports. It is the differences within the common framework of “outsiders” that provides sociological insight into the relationship between public information and popular culture, on the one hand, and public opinion and perceptions, on the other hand. Further research on this topic would do well to examine the process by which certain groups are conceived of favorably while others are not afforded the same public perception.

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