Indigenous youth and gangs as family

Much of the conventional youth gang literature describes gangs as a sort of 'family' for members. The gang provides a source of support, solidarity and social connection, and thus fulfils some of the functions of a close-knit family unit. What happens, however, when the 'gang' and the 'family' are one and the same? This paper explores the ways in which Indigenous young people experience gang activity as stemming from family membership and family obligations. Indeed, the notion of 'gang' is itself highly contentious for many Indigenous youth, given that their group behaviour is intrinsically bound by cultural and kinship ties. Based on recent gang research in Australia, the paper provides firsthand accounts of what 'life in the gang / life in the family' means for Indigenous young people.

by Rob White

The role of gangs as a substitute family for many young people has been widely noted in youth gangs literature (see, for example, Short & Hughes 2006; Hagedorn 2007; van Gemert, Peterson & Lien 2008). However, what happens if the "gang" is simultaneously, and literally, one's family? That is, how do we account for and provide analysis of social formations that incorporate family and gang in the same grouping?

This paper is premised upon three basic propositions. These are:

1. that the gang performs a family-like role for gang members, regardless of specific social composition, particularly when it comes to material support, emotional refuge, psychological wellbeing, physical protection and social belonging;
2. that in some cases, particularly in regard to ethnic minority youth, the gang is mainly comprised of family members and / or members from a distinctive and frequently tight-knit community, which means that there already exist strong filial bonds within the context of gang formation;
3. that in the case of Indigenous young people, the gang and family connection is unique insofar as the colonial experience reinforces an "Othering" process that is distinctive and specific to this group.

When it comes to the latter instance, consideration of the close interconnection between family and gang is important for several reasons. First, it is important because by understanding this

connection we can better understand the social determinants of gang formation and the reasons why the gang can become so central within some young people's lives. Second, the development of anti-gang strategies that do not reflect, and respect, family considerations are bound to not only fail, but also to reproduce the worst aspects of oppressive colonial rule.

Many of the causes of Indigenous gang formation and mobilisation are inextricably linked to the systematic dispossession of Indigenous people and their ongoing subjugation within a non-Indigenous criminal justice system. The breaking up of families has been central to these processes, historically and in the contemporary time period. The social consequences have been devastating for Indigenous people, including young people.

The paper begins with a brief consideration of what it is like to "grow up Indigenous" in Australian society. The main concern of the paper, however, is with Indigenous young people and their experience of gang activity as this relates to family membership and family obligations. Indeed, the notion of "gang" is itself highly contentious for many Indigenous youth, given that their group behaviour is intrinsically bounded by cultural and kinship ties. Based on recent gang research in Australia, the paper provides firsthand accounts of what "life in the gang / life in the family" means for Indigenous young people. This is followed by discussion of what this means for understanding and responding to Indigenous youth gangs.

Growing up Indigenous

The experiences of Indigenous people have been fundamentally shaped by colonialist processes, and yet their experiences are variable due to the diverse social worlds that they inhabit (White & Wyn 2008). As with youth in general, there is great variability in Indigenous communities, and the Indigenous population as a whole is heterogenous across many different dimensions. What unites the many is the shared experiences of injustice, inequality and oppression at the hands of a colonial state, an experience that continues to the present day (see Morrissey 2006).

Today, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population – the Indigenous people of Australia – is estimated to be about 2.4% of the total Australian population. The Indigenous population is relatively young compared to the non-Indigenous population. In 2001, 39% of Indigenous people were under 15 years of age, compared to 20% of non-Indigenous people. In 2002, just over half of Indigenous people aged 15 years or over reported that they identified with a clan, tribal or language group, and in 2002, 21% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 or over spoke an Indigenous language (Australian Bureau of Statistics and Australian Institute of Health & Welfare 2005).

Since the initial British invasion of 1788, the Indigenous people of Australia have been subjected to myriad interventions, exclusions and social controls. This is not simply a historical legacy; it is part of the fabric of everyday life for many Indigenous people today. Colonialism has had a severe impact on Indigenous cultures and ways of life, as have the continuing effects of discriminatory policies and practices on Indigenous life chances within mainstream social institutions.

The dislocations and social marginalisation associated with colonialism have had particular ramifications for Indigenous young people. It is worth noting that, historically, and in particular, young Indigenous women were prone to policies that were intended to separate them from their families and communities, and that this constituted a form of cultural and physical genocide (see Goodall 1990). Today, it has been argued that, rather than breaking up communities on the basis of a welfare or protectionist rationale, the same effect is being achieved through the systematic "criminalisation" of young Indigenous people, although the main target now is young men (National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families (NISATSIC) 1997; Cunneen 1994).

Young Indigenous people are very conscious of the dynamics of racism and policing in particular. Interviews with young Indigenous people in Darwin and Alice Springs in the late 1990s made this very clear (see White 1999). When asked about the things that most influence the way other people view them when they hang out in public space, the young people most frequently mentioned racism, stereotypes of young people,

and the fact that many older people did not seem to like young people hanging around together in groups. It would appear that the feelings of exclusion and undue harassment experienced by many of these young people were the result of negative reactions to them, which were based on a combination of Indigenous status, colour of their skin, age and class position. Typical comments by the young people included:

> *Being black, people think you are going to commit a crime.* (Young man)
>
> *Where old people are they stare at us if we're sitting there as if we have no right to sit there, treat us bad and serve us last. We still go but.* (Young woman)
>
> *I hate going down the shops. They [shop owners] always saying, "Oh, you been shoplifting". Everyone gets always accused of shoplifting round here. You can't window shop and browse. You can't even price something. You got to walk in there with the money and buy it there and then.* (Young woman)

The position of young Indigenous people in Australian society makes them very vulnerable to over-policing and exclusionary practices. It also makes them angry (White 1999; Ogwang, Cox & Saldanha 2006, p.420).

Nevertheless, popular images and representations of Indigenous young people tend to over-emphasise criminal activities and substance abuse while ignoring the significant proportions of young people not implicated or engaged in these activities (Palmer & Collard 1993). Other distorted or one-sided representations are apparent as well. There is, for example, the underlying assumption that all Indigenous young people, regardless of family background, have similar issues and life chances. This assumption leads to little appreciation of social differences within the Indigenous population, apart from social differences that separate the Indigenous and the non-Indigenous.

Indigenous gang experiences

This section is based upon interviews with Indigenous young people that were carried out as part of a larger national study of youth gangs in Australia in the early to mid-2000s (White 2006, 2008). The study involved interviews with up to 50 young people in each capital city. The sample consisted of young people who self-identified as being gang members, or who were identified by "gatekeepers" such as youth and community workers as being perceived to be engaged in gang activities. Among the overall sample, there were Indigenous respondents in Canberra (n=13), Hobart (n=4), Perth (n=7) and Darwin (n=7). Although the total number was relatively small (n=31), the responses were remarkably similar in nature regardless of the location and specific background of the young person (e.g. in one city the key source of respondents was young people serving time in a youth detention centre). Several key themes presented themselves across the sample.

'Blackfellas hang out with blackfellas'

Not all of the young people who were interviewed for this study hung out with immediate family members. But family ties and identification as Indigenous were central to their social networks and self-identity. As one young Canberra man put it, "blackfellas hang out with blackfellas".

Many of the young people came from chaotic and unstable family situations, and a number had been "kicked out of house". Their friendship group was comprised of similarly placed Indigenous youth. In an Indigenous context, family generally refers to extended family, rather than just the immediate nuclear family. For one young Canberra woman, her mother was not to be trusted ("because I was pregnant and my mum told everyone"), but she could trust her sisters, whom she talked about as being like mothers to her.

In many cases, the sense of family connection was central to group identity and formation. One group – the Barclay Murder Squad in Darwin – had its name made up by the respondent's uncle. Only family members could belong. Similarly, other respondents in Darwin spoke about how they stayed in the gang because it was made up of family and friends who they had grown up with. The theme that local gangs are criminal groups based on family emerged strongly. In Perth, a young man spoke at length about how his fellow group members are mainly his cousins.

By contrast, the question of Indigenous identity was fraught with ambiguity in places like Hobart (due to the peculiar colonial history

Everyone gets always accused of shoplifting round here. You can't window shop and browse. You can't even price something. You got to walk in there with the money and buy it there and then.

of this state). This led to complicated identity politics at the level of everyday relations. One respondent identified himself as being a bit of a "blackfella" and alluded to the fact that he had black identity in his family heritage. The young person had at one stage been bashed, and his father had been stabbed in a separate incident by other known members of the same gang. The perpetrators in this instance were described as "my cousins that I don't like to claim as cousins, but they are. You can't help that can you, it's family". Family ties come in different guises, not every "blackfella" identifies publicly as being Indigenous. And, as this story indicates, not all "family" relationships are close knit and friendly.

'If we wasn't Aboriginal, they would treat us like gold'

The social injuries of racism, prejudice and discrimination were apparent across the board. Many of the young people interviewed reported profoundly disturbing and traumatic experiences. A young woman in Canberra said:

> *They even called me "black dog" and I don't like being called black dog. That's how come I got kicked out of [L] High because people kept calling me black dog and shit … teachers treat me like I'm different compared to white people … And it really hurts [is upset and almost crying] … We had two white people in our group, but the others treat me like – like we were nothing 'cause we're Aboriginal and because the way life has grown is because Aboriginals are worth nothing, but white people are worth something. So we had hardly any white people for friends … Teachers treat me and my sister different because we're Aboriginal. That's the only reason. If we wasn't Aboriginal, they would treat us like gold.*

Racism was in many cases a unifying experience, if for no other reason than that fights and conflicts were based upon "race" and ethnic background. One young Canberra man told us that "Yeah, we're always fighting with most other people in school 'cause we're just dark – outcasts compared to them". This reinforces an outsider identity, while at the same time forging stronger links internal to the group.

Fighting, especially at school, was typically described as occurring between different races and people from different social backgrounds, generally between "white" and "black" people and in some cases between Aborigines and "wogs" (ethnic minority youth from Italian, Greek or other Mediterranean backgrounds).

'Yeah we've got our area. If anyone comes through just pissing us off, we usually bash 'em, fight 'em, stuff like that'

What came through in the interview was a strong sense of local territory. This was intertwined with family identity. In Darwin, for example, there seemed to be a clear "pack" mentality with strong family ties. A lot of the respondents' friendship groups and gang-related activity were with family members and people from the same area. In fact, the only social contact they seemed to have was with members of their group.

In each of the cities where the interviews took place, the young people named specific local areas that they identified with and claimed as their own territory. In Canberra, it was noted that one group protected their territory by hanging around and "giving it" to anyone who was a smart arse in their area: "They just know that we're ready to fight – yeah and they'll get it", said one young man.

A "racial" identity is bound up, therefore, with a sense of territory. Cultural identity – one's identification as being Indigenous – is grounded by being located within a defined geographical space. A gang defends this territory. One Canberra young man described a gang as follows:

> *Umm, just a group of friends, illegal activity, just territory – stuff like that. Just – yeah – cultural identity and stuff like that … umm, yeah we've got our area. Just [name of suburb]. If anyone comes through just pissing us off, we usually bash 'em, fight 'em, stuff like that.*

For some, the gang is akin to a clan, a big family, which is bound together by geography. Familiarity with one's territory means fierce protection of possible outside disruption to that territory. As one young man put it, a sense of territoriality best defines what a gang is:

> *'Cause you've gotta look after your neighbourhood. You can't just let, umm, how can I put*

it? A stray come along. It's like having a nice beautiful garden right, and all it takes is one weed to come up and the next thing you know, the whole garden's gone 'cause you got one weed.

Interestingly, the sense of territory can also serve to divide Indigenous youth from each other. One Darwin person who was in detention at the time of interview could not wait until his release because his particular gang was in the minority inside the detention centre: "In here, you haven't got any backup. There's Casuarina boys in here and there's only two Palmerston boys". Protecting territory thus also demands a certain weight of numbers when young people are taken out of their home spaces and put into neutral places.

'It doesn't matter who they are or what race they are. We don't discriminate'

Gang membership is sometimes open, yet nonetheless contingent. For instance, in some groups, "race" is a defining feature of membership. As one Canberra youth stated unequivocally, "White people can't belong to our group". However, invocation of this criterion was not always the case for exclusion. Another young Canberra man spoke about what members of his group had in common, and the group included "outsiders" (in this case referring to "white" young people).

Loud, disruptive, criminalistic minds, ethnic backgrounds – we're all Aboriginal. There's a couple of outsiders that are also part of the crew and, you know, they just don't give a shit and they don't point the finger whether you're black, white, yellow or purple … They're just good to chill back and have a drink with.

Similar observations were made in Darwin, where although one group was mainly comprised of Indigenous males, other ethnicities were welcome; they just had to live in the local suburb.

A bottom line does exist, however, when it comes to who is allowed to hang around with whom. It is not only about having a good time or protecting one's mates when it comes to fighting. It is about general attitudes toward difference and to the Other. As one Perth gang member stated it:

Racist people can't belong to our group. I don't mean just racist talk like 'cause like most of us are Aboriginal in our group. Like we don't like people who are racist to any group.

The hurtfulness of racism goes much deeper than just the question of membership of a group however. A Canberra youth had this to say:

… teachers were racist 'cause I may be white, but I've got Aboriginal in me and, yeah, I had a lot of shit thrown at me because of that. But I also threw a lot of shit back at people for giving it to me. Not so much in verbal, but as in little bits of violence here and there … People throwing shit at me, it was mainly verbal, a couple of times physical. But mainly when people threw verbal shit about me – about racist remarks – I'm not going to mention 'cause they're pretty derogatory and it's just fucking ridiculous, you know, we're all the same fucking colour, we all have to fucking live in this world, so why can't we all just get along? I'm not racist – the way I see it I'm not racist. I just hate everyone.

Another Canberra youth commented on whom he likes to hang out with and why in the following terms:

'Cause we understand each other and we're always there to help each other. It's mainly Aboriginals, but my girlfriend, she's a wog, and I've got another mate who's Australian – like white Australian.

'They wanna think they're tougher than other groups. They wanna be superior'

Another perspective on Indigenous gang formation is provided by non-Indigenous young people who were also interviewed for the national youth gangs study. One set of comments came from young Anglo-Australian people in Perth. A common theme was the idea that Indigenous youth engaged in a form of reverse racism. This is reflected in the following comments by two respondents:

Like Aboriginals are a better race, that they're better than us and no-one's really quite game to fight with them and things like that … Umm, getting things stolen from me because I was white and my friends have had things stolen out of their bags and they've been ganged up on at school like.

Most of the Aboriginals stick together. We're still friends with 'em, but they stick together

in one group, so sometimes they gang up on white people or treat them like they're lower or something like that. But not – they wouldn't go round bashing 'em up for no reason, yeah, but you can just see it.

Another Perth respondent was asked why he or she had said that if there was an incident with an Aboriginal young person and a "white" young person, the authorities immediately blamed the Aboriginal person:

I'd have to say it's the Aboriginal's behaviour. Like some of them I reckon are alright, but on the whole when they're in a group, they just break windows and stuff yeah … Umm, like well Miss X – if I can say that – if there's ever something going on, she'll instantly – I'm not sure if it's just 'cause they're trouble makers – but she'll instantly blame Y and W because they're Aboriginal. It's like even though most of the time it's either me or my other mates that are doing it. We don't deliberately try to get them into trouble or anything, but they instantly just assume it's them. Of course we'd own up, but its weird how they just assume they're the ones responsible.

Perhaps part of the reason why Indigenous young people are singled out for being responsible for wrongdoing, whether or not they have perpetrated the trouble, lies in the following observation by another respondent:

It's not apparent all the time, but [racism] is there between the Aboriginals and the whites and the Asians and the Middle Eastern people. Just general stuff that goes on. Like a lot of people think that it's always the white people that are giving out the racism, but it's actually I've seen more of the other way … If they start making accusations about other people in the group usually there's a white group involved, and also Aboriginals have this great like capacity to kind of stick up for their race and they've got loyalty. It's a great quality to have usually, but sometimes things get a bit out of hand when there's fights involved …

It's not apparent all the time, but [racism] is there between the Aboriginals and the whites and the Asians and the Middle Eastern people.

Other respondents alleged that it was usually Indigenous young people who started fights at school; and group loyalty ensured that their presence would certainly be felt regardless of how a conflict originated.

In Darwin, a number of the "Asian" (e.g., Chinese, Vietnamese, Malaysian-Australian) young people also spoke about the local family-based Indigenous gangs. One person commented:

There's nothing to do. They wanna look good. They wanna think they're tougher than other groups. They wanna be superior. They want the attention and they wanna also give the message "Oh you can't mess around with us. Don't come onto our territory or anything like that".

Another pointed to deep resentments of and constant harassment of Asian young people by Indigenous people. Threats to them (Asian young people) were continuous and, in many cases, real. In contrast, Indigenous young people in Canberra spoke about how they relate to and get along with Indian-background young people. The nature of specific places, and the ethnic and racial composition of specific local populations, influences who hangs around with whom, and which groups are in an antagonistic relationship.

Explaining and responding to the gangs/family nexus

To understand fully the issues and conflicts pertaining to Indigenous young people's relationship with the criminal justice system, it is essential to acknowledge the continuing legacy and present realities of colonialism in the lives of Indigenous people (see for example, Johnston 1991, v.2). So too, to understand the attractions and dynamics of gang formation for Indigenous young people it is vital to put the relationship between "gang" and "family" into social context. Accordingly, the next part of the paper discusses three interrelated issues: family, criminal justice and social identity.

Questions of family

The negative impact of constant state intervention into the families and communities of Indigenous people cannot be underestimated. The Stolen Generations Inquiry estimated that between one in 10 and one in three Aboriginal children, depending on the period and location, were removed from their families between 1910 and 1970; thus most Indigenous families have

been affected by this phenomenon (NISATSIC 1997, p.37).

The earlier policies of forced removals continue to have contemporary effects (Cunneen & White 2007, p.146), including complex trauma-related psychological and psychiatric effects relating to issues such as parenting skills, unresolved grief and trauma, violence, depression, mental illness and other behavioural problems. Indigenous children are still significantly overrepresented in contact with welfare agencies. Nationally, around 20% of children in care are Indigenous. A significant proportion of such children are placed with non-Indigenous families, which is particularly the case for those in long-term foster care (Cunneen & Libesman 2001).

The nature of state intervention – whether for welfare or criminalisation purposes – has had a profound effect on Indigenous ways of life, the relationship of Indigenous people to authority figures such as the police, and on the experiences of young Indigenous people as they grow up in a (post)colonial context.

With regard to gang issues, the family is central. The relationship is at times complex and somewhat ambiguous, with several different dimensions. Depending upon the circumstances:

- family members are actual gang members, or
- gang members are seen as family, or
- the effect of dysfunctional family backgrounds of neglect or abuse may lead young people to adopt criminal/antisocial lifestyles.

For some gang members, all three of the above is accurate.

One legacy of colonialism has been heightened levels of intra-family conflict, including child sexual abuse (for a critical examination of this issue see Blagg 2008; also Kimm 2004). The issue of Indigenous family violence is prominent today in Australia and has led to massive state intervention in places such as the Northern Territory. Our concern here is not with the nature of the intervention, nor with the documentation of family violence, rather, it is simply to say that such violence necessarily has a major impact on young Indigenous people who witness and/or are on the receiving end of the violence.

For many of those who were removed from their parents, the role of parenting has subsequently been quite foreign, and in many cases individuals have also suffered from lack of communal support in childrearing (NISATSIC 1997). This can lead to instances of neglectful parenting, abusive relationships and poor role modelling.

The nature and quality of parenting is thus partly shaped by the nature and dynamics of family formation, as determined by oppressive state policies and interventions. This can have major repercussions for young people in terms of upbringing and modes of conflict resolution. In addition, there are huge pressures on Indigenous children who are growing up in what is still a very racist social climate.

Questions of criminal justice

There is a close relationship between social marginalisation (incorporating racial discrimination and economic and social exclusion) and criminalisation (which constitutes one type of state response to marginalisation). Extensive research has been undertaken in recent years on the overrepresentation of Indigenous people in the criminal justice system, research that has provided considerable evidence of overrepresentation in most jurisdictions and particularly at the most punitive end of the system, in detention centres (Johnston 1991; Beresford & Omaji 1996; Cunneen & White 2007; NISATSIC 1997).

A recent report found that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Indigenous) young people were highly overrepresented among those who have juvenile justice supervision (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2008). The statistical story is striking:

- Although only about 3% of the total Australian population and 5% of Australians aged 10–17 years are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, over a third (36%) of those who had supervision in 2006–2007 were Indigenous young people. In several states and territories there were more Indigenous young people under supervision than non-Indigenous young people (particularly in those locales where there are higher proportions of Indigenous young people, such as Western Australia and the Northern Territory).

- On an average day in 2006–2007, over one-third of those in community-based supervision, and nearly half of those in detention, were Indigenous young people. For example, of the 941 young people in detention, either on pre-sentence or sentenced detention, 410 were Indigenous males compared with 437 non-Indigenous males (18 unknown status), and 33 were Indigenous females compared with 41 non-Indigenous females (two unknown status). Thus the overrepresentation increases the further one goes towards the harshest parts of the juvenile justice system.
- Of Australians aged 10–17 years, Indigenous young people were nearly 14 times more likely to be under supervision in 2006–2007 than non-Indigenous young people. Indigenous young people under supervision are also more likely to be younger than non-Indigenous young people and they are more likely to have entered supervision for the first time at a younger age. For example, for young people aged 10 to 15, 61% of the average daily population in detention were Indigenous, but the proportion decreased to 17% for young people aged 18 and older. Moreover, among those aged 10–13, a greater proportion of females than males were Indigenous.

These patterns continue a historical trend that criminologists have noted for some time (Cunneen & White 2007; Cunneen 2001). For present purposes I want to consider some of the cultural and social consequences for Indigenous young people, given the high rates of incarceration in particular.

First, for many Indigenous young people, prison is not a strange place. High rates of incarceration for both young and older members of their communities means that contact with the criminal justice system is routine and expected, rather than unusual and foreign. Bad blood between authority figures is historically grounded, and is still evident in contemporary social relations. It has a major impact on how young Indigenous people see themselves. It also has significant implications for the labelling of Indigenous young people in the public domains of the streets, malls and parklands.

Second, for some young Indigenous people, prison is a place you WANT to go to. It can be a rite of passage for some (see Johnston 1991; Ogilvie & Van Zyl 2001). Importantly, especially given the statistics on youth detention, Indigenous people are frequently in the majority in prison, and at the very least are present in large numbers. They are the strong ones. They also learn the language of the prison and detention centre. Such language can be both alien and attractive to young people on the outside. This, in turn, can contribute towards a gang culture and gang mentality among some Indigenous young people.

Questions of social identity

A major question facing many Indigenous young people is who, precisely, are they? This is by no means an easy question to answer. Recent musings on the nature of indigeneity and, indeed, identity generally, have provided striking illustrations of the incredible complexities of defining who we are. Paradies (2006) points out that many Indigenous people are simultaneously non-Indigenous – they have European and Asian ancestry as well as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ancestry. Furthermore, about half of all Indigenous people in committed relationships have a non-Indigenous partner. Yet, as Paradies observes, "despite this heterogeneity in the Indigenous community, asserting a multiracial Indigenous identity is neither common nor straightforward because racial loyalty demands that anomalous individuals choose to be either exclusively Indigenous or exclusively non-Indigenous …" (2006, p.357). However, further to this, youth research indicates that many Indigenous youth have their social identity thrust upon them – in the sense that they experience racism precisely because they are perceived to be Indigenous. Racism at one and the same time reinforces a master status: social identity is partly a matter of how others treat us.

For those who do identify and who are identified as Indigenous, the social world may be filled with complex expectations and, in some cases, violence. A study of street-present young people in urban centres revealed that many felt uncomfortable with their status, especially after seeing how their parents were treated by non-Indigenous people, and so the streets and crime

become an alternative measure of who they are and the meaning of success (Johnston 1991). Other research (Ogwang, Cox & Saldanha 2006) has demonstrated that the harder authorities push, and the more young Indigenous people are vilified, the more likely it is that they will become marginalised and engage in activities such as chroming or paint sniffing.

The response of young people in remote communities to marginalisation, unemployment and social devalorisation has included more than self-medication such as petrol sniffing. For example, the small town of Wadeye in a remote area of the Northern Territory made national headlines in 2004 following the emergence of a new kind of gang culture (Toohey 2004). Hundreds of adults and younger children were forced to flee the town because of the high levels of violence perpetrated by members of groups with names such as Judas Priest and the Evil Warriors. Houses were trashed, and elders ignored. The fusion of contemporary music, extreme alienation and group violence shows that identity is diversely and oppositionally constructed within indigeneity as well as in relation to the non-Indigenous.

Disapproval of their dress, manner, speech and other behaviour by members of the general public can foster continued and renewed antisocial behaviour on the part of some Indigenous young people (Ogwang, Cox & Saldanha 2006). But this spiral of amplification had its starting point in the original marginalisation of these particular young Indigenous people. Infighting of the kind witnessed in Wadeye could be analysed in terms of masculinity, territoriality and other conventional gang research concepts but, fundamentally, the deviance is grounded in the material conditions and cultural realities of the specific young people involved. Without addressing these kinds of factors, no amount of coercive intervention will succeed in putting out the fires of frustration, suppressed anger, humiliation and separation.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the relationship between gangs and families as this relates to Indigenous young people. Interviews with Indigenous young people who describe themselves or who have been described by key informants as gang members demonstrate a series of overlapping issues in their lives. These include:

- The identity politics of the everyday is manifest in close communal and family ties among Indigenous youth gang members – Indigenous youth hang out with Indigenous youth, sometimes by choice, sometimes by the simple contingency of living near family members.
- Systematic discrimination and racism is a feature of everyday life for Indigenous youth – social harm and humiliation is a daily experience that unites Indigenous young people and thereby shapes self-esteem, and individual and collective identity.
- Specific locations are subject to intense forms of territorialism – defence of oneself and one's group is intertwined with claiming ownership of defined geographical areas, and this reinforces a shared gang identity based on more than family affiliation.
- Racism is countered by both strong family ties and strong anti-racist sentiment – group membership is about shared experiences, shared feelings, shared familial links and shared attitudes that can sometimes accommodate the non-Indigenous.

Most if not all of these social dimensions are simultaneously contextualised by the pervasive influence and continuing intrusions of colonial relationships. These relationships are manifest in discriminatory policing and inequalities in criminal justice, persistent inadequacies in welfare and educational provision, and diminished work and life chances for Indigenous people relative to their non-Indigenous counterparts.

Breaking up the gang, under these circumstances, is about breaking up the family. Yet, as this paper has argued, it is the prior break-up of Indigenous families, and the dispossession of Indigenous people from their "country", that has created a volatile and at times dysfunctional situation for many young Indigenous people. In response, the "gang" can simultaneously perform the functions of a supportive family while actually being family in social composition. In the face of a hostile environment, one characterised by racism

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and extremes of social, economic and political marginalisation, the gang thus is both a network of emotional and material support and an important outlet for aggression and resistance. Imprisonment, itself, feeds this function and process of identity consolidation.

A reconstitution of the gang as family in a more positive and less antisocial direction therefore demands a shift in vision away from seeing the gang as the main problem. The answer lies in constructing a political vision that is socially progressive and that is inclusive of Indigenous people. Dealing with racism is at the core of this process, as is addressing the continuing legacies of colonial rule.

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