

0142

'Nae wonder we don't like them, when they come in and try and bomb Glasgow airport ...': Youth gangs, racism and intercultural social capital in Glasgow

Ross Deuchar

Universiy of Strathclyde, Glasgow, United Kingdom

Background

It has been estimated that there are currently over five thousand asylum seekers and refugees settled in Scotland, with the majority located in Glasgow (COSLA, 2009). Young people who have been forced to seek asylum often have to cope with both a traumatic past and an uncertain future; they may be cut off culturally, socially and economically from their families, and may struggle to feel 'an equal among equals', as a result of their exposure to racist bullying (Zabaleta, 2003: 20; Whiteman, 2005). Thus their opportunities for 'bridging' social capital may be limited (Putnam, 2000). Some argue that the current policy of dispersing asylum seekers to British cities with little experience of building multicultural communities is inadvisable because of the continued prevalence of racism (Sim and Bowes, 2007). Glasgow is one such city, where there have been increasing reports about racial tensions in the aftermath of the terrorist attack at Glasgow Airport in the summer of 2007. Recent media reports have drawn the public's attention to the rise of neo-Nazi skinhead youth gangs, and there have been reports of random racist attacks against asylum seekers and claims that some gangs have created websites daubed with Nazi insignia with links to far-right discussion forums (Deuchar, 2009). In addition, it has been claimed that there has been a rise in black and Asian gangs in some parts of Glasgow, and that the victims of these gangs' attacks are just as likely to be other blacks and Asians as they are to be white. Some reports have suggested that police officers are too afraid to intervene in such gang violence for fear of being accused of racism (Jardine and Bellamy, 2009).

Research Questions

This research sought to explore the relationship between gang violence, youth identity and issues of asylum in Glasgow for both white youth and youth from refugee/asylum seeker backgrounds. Specifically, it aimed to address the following questions:

- (a) How does gang culture impact on young asylum seekers' and refugees' spatial mobility, levels of social trust and reciprocity?
- (b) To what extent - and in what ways - do young asylum seekers and refugees seek compensatory forms of social capital through gang membership?
- (c) To what extent do young white gang members draw upon racial prejudice as a stimulus for violence?
- (d) What role does education play in generating bridging social capital between white youth and youth from refugee/asylum seeker backgrounds?

Methods

Data was collected in communities in Glasgow with high indicators of social deprivation. Drawing upon an ethnographic approach, local gatekeepers facilitated access to young people and also become key informants (Bryman, 2008). Adopting the 'observer-as-participant' role enabled the researcher to create theories derived from the data (Gold, 1958; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Initial open-ended interviews with community leaders, teachers and operational police officers in each community were combined with informal interaction with 70 young people (aged 14-21) in youth organisations and schools, in order to establish trust. Subsequent visits to each venue were focused on the implementation of semi-structured interviews with 50 young white people and 25 young

refugees/asylum seekers. The interviews sought to explore the extent of the reciprocity which exists between white youth and members of Glasgow's young asylum seeker/refugee community. They explored the impact of territoriality and gang violence on young people's social capital, and the reasons why some young refugees and asylum seekers may seek to join youth gangs. Interviews with community leaders, teachers and young people also focused on exploring the extent to which schools and youth organisations may generate increased levels of bridging social capital between different cultures in Glasgow.

Frame

The current public concern about territorial youth gangs has arisen alongside the recent political focus on anti-social behaviour (Waiton, 2008; Squires, 2008). While some have attempted to create particular gang typologies (Thrasher, 1927; Yablonsky, 1966; Klein, 2001; Van Gemert and Fleisher, 2005), others have argued that specific gang characteristics are determined by individual localities (Pitts, 2008). Recent research suggests that youth gangs in Glasgow may provide young people with compensatory forms of social capital (Deuchar, 2009). Although social capital theory has been around since the early part of the 20th Century (Hanifan, 1916), it is recognised that it is still a contested concept. Many believe that social capital has at its heart the need for networking as a means of facilitating collective wellbeing (Coleman, 1990; Putnam, 2000; AERS, 2004). The common argument is that young people need to move from bonding to bridging networks, where they transcend their immediate social circumstances as a means of equipping them for broader social inclusion (Putnam, 2000). It has also been argued that deprived communities may benefit most from having closely bonded groups (Leonard and Onyx, 2004). However Bassani (2007) highlights that young people in these communities can often generate intense in-group ties which result in factionalism (Leonard and Onyx, 2004). Building on earlier work in Glasgow (Deuchar, 2009), this research sought to explore the extent to which gang culture generates bonding and bridging social capital among young people (Putnam, 2000; Leonard and Onyx, 2004). It explored the relationship between gang violence, youth identity and issues of asylum in Glasgow, drawing upon social capital theory as a lens through which to examine the emerging data.

Research findings

The findings illustrate that, while young white gang members claimed that gangs were not openly racist, occasional unprovoked verbal and physical gang attacks against refugees/asylum seekers did take place, and evidence of racial prejudice was common. While some young refugees/asylum seekers became members of gangs as a means of seeking compensatory forms of social capital (Bassani, 2007), others retreated further into their own cultural unit and felt socially distanced from mainstream society (Virdee, 1997; Deuchar, 2009). New initiatives in schools and youth organisations were developing young people's capacity to build and deepen socialisation networks and to resolve territorial divisions in their local communities. Opportunities for intercultural integration were enabling young refugees/asylum seekers to gain a sense of citizenship, characterised by participation, inclusion and a feeling of belonging (Gimenez, 2005). However, some young people clearly felt that more needed to be done to eliminate prejudice and discrimination within Glasgow's housing schemes.