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“Running Trains” and “Sexing-In”: The Functions of Sex Within Adolescent Gangs

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Abstract

Gang members are exposed to unique sexual risks, yet little work has explored the influence of gang social norms. This study examines the functions and meanings of sex within gangs, with a specific focus on the ways in which sex is used to reinforce gang membership and norms, gender roles, and group cohesion. We conducted 58 semi-structured interviews with adolescent members of six gangs. Data were analyzed using thematic content analysis and constant comparative method in MAXQDA. Sexual risk behaviors within gangs are upheld and reinforced through unspoken norms and expectations. These high-risk sexual practices increase group cohesion and reinforce gender norms and power differences. Despite the prevalence of such practices, many gang members felt regret and remorse over their participation but noted it was just part of “the life.” Our findings highlight the need for interventions to address the norms of the gang that reinforce sexual risk behavior.

Keywords

sexual behavior/risk; urban context; aggressive behavior/bullying; gangs

Recent estimates suggest there are nearly 30,000 gangs and more than one million juvenile gang members in the United States (Egley & Howell, 2012; Pyrooz & Sweeten, 2015), a disproportionate number of whom are Black and Hispanic males from families living below the poverty line (Pyrooz & Sweeten, 2015). This disparity present among gang members may be partly attributable to the fact that racial and ethnic minorities are more likely than Whites to live in communities with characteristics that contribute to gang membership: concentrated poverty, resource-deprived schools and social institutions, unemployment, poor housing stock, and higher rates of crime and violence (Freng & Taylor, 2013). Gang membership is often understood to be a response to or coping mechanism for social and psychological stressors, and can provide financial opportunities, a sense of belonging and “family,” and perceived protection against neighborhood violence (Brooks, Lee, Stover, &

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Barkley, 2009; Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1999). Yet, gang membership generates unique and complex risks and experiences for adolescents, especially regarding their sexual experiences and risk behaviors (Brooks et al., 2009; Voisin, Hotton, & Neilands, 2014).

Abundant prior research about the sexual risks associated with gang membership (Ulloa, Dyson, & Wynes, 2012; Voisin, Chen, Fullilove, & Jakobson, 2015; Voisin et al., 2014) clearly demonstrates that gang-affiliated youth have significantly higher rates of sexual risk behaviors than non-gang members (Minnis et al., 2008; Voisin et al., 2004; Wingood et al., 2002). On average, gang-affiliated youth first have sex between 13 and 14 years old, significantly younger than the national average of 16 years (Sanders, Lankenau, & Jackson-Bloom, 2009), and early sexual debut has been linked to community violence and other gang-related activities (Voisin et al., 2014). In addition, gang participation is associated with recent sexually transmitted infection (STI) diagnosis (Buffardi, Thomas, Holmes, & Manhart, 2008; Epstein et al., 2014) and with high rates of unprotected sex, sex while under the influence of drugs or alcohol, and having multiple, concurrent sexual partners (Brooks et al., 2009; Voisin et al., 2004).

Although the association between gang membership and sexual risk has been established, the prominence of sexual expectations and sexual violence within gangs is unclear and researchers disagree about the extent to which girls are sexualized within gangs (Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2013; J. Miller, 1998a; Peterson, 2012). Miller (1998a) and Miller & Decker (2001) explored variations in gang structure and composition and highlighted how gender roles shape gang violence and victimization, including girls' sexual initiation, or the requirement that girls have sex with male gang members to join the gang. Their findings reveal that, compared with girls initiated in other ways, girls who are "sexed-in" face additional stigma and devaluation that often increase the risk of ongoing mistreatment by fellow gang members. Panfil (2015) suggested that the practice of sexual initiation is based on misogynistic values and is a reflection of gendered attempts to control females in mixed-sex gangs. Other research has refuted the idea of girls as sex objects within gangs and suggested that the frequent portrayal of sexual exploitation and domination of girls in gangs is exaggerated (Howell, 2007; Moore & Hagedorn, 2001).

Although the extent to which girls in gangs are sexualized remains unclear, research has demonstrated that the gender composition and structure of a gang is critical in shaping its norms and activities, including sexual behaviors (Peterson, Miller, & Esbensen, 2001), and that situational norms and constructs of gender, race, and class may help explain experiences of violence and delinquency (Flavin, 2001). Gender norms and expectations of masculinity among gang members often reflect larger social processes, may serve to increase gang cohesion (Decker, 1996), and can provide context for sexual risk behaviors. Central group norms often supersede individual beliefs and morality and violent or misogynistic sexual attitudes, and behaviors in the gang may be reflective of collective attitudes and behaviors that increase cohesion among its members. For example, although gang membership may be associated with sexual risk, the presence of norms that perpetuate male dominance, sexual violence against women, and sexual risk behaviors within gangs confer even greater risk (King, Voisin, & DiClemente, 2013).

The importance of gender norms within gangs may be, in part, explained by what sociologist Raewyn Connell refers to as hegemonic masculinity, or the cultural norms and patterns of practice that support and encourage men's dominance over women and reproduces gendered hierarchies (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Connell argued that there are multiple forms of masculinity, which are fluid, yet hierarchical. The normative form of hegemonic masculinity in the United States is based on White, heterosexual, middle class males who demonstrate assertiveness, dominance, control, physical strength, and emotional restraint (Griffith, Gunter, & Watkins, 2012). Men who do not possess these characteristics (e.g., Black males of low socioeconomic status) may seek out unconventional opportunities to demonstrate power and success. Gangs may be viewed as the most promising opportunity for young men to demonstrate masculinity and achieve status when conventional means (e.g., well-paying mainstream employment, educational attainment) appear unattainable (Baird, 2012). Criminal and sexual risk behaviors may be rooted in hegemonic ideals about men (Jewkes, Flood, & Lang, 2015), wherein boys are socialized to portray toughness, sexual dominance, and financial success (Hyde, Drennan, Howlett, & Brady, 2009). Thus, delinquent behavior (including that which is sexual in nature) may be a reflection of masculine ideologies to achieve money, respect, and status (J. Miller, 1998b).

Despite its prevalence among gang members, little has been written about the role of sex in reinforcing gang membership, gang unity, loyalty, and respect. Given that gang membership can confer unique sexual risks and exert a powerful influence over adolescent behavior, addressing sexual risk among adolescent gang members requires a more comprehensive understanding of the social and normative influences of the gang in sexual decision making. Similarly, the importance of coercion and power (or the perception of such phenomena) as adolescents make decisions about sex, and the internal conflict and regret experienced by both male and female gang members about such practices, has not been carefully considered. As such, the current research examines sexual risk behaviors within the context of gang norms and expectations, with particular consideration of the role of race, class, and gendered power dynamics.

Method

Sampling and Data Collection

Between June 2012 and July 2013, we conducted 58 semi-structured interviews with active adolescent members of six Milwaukee gangs. Gangs were defined as "any durable, street-oriented youth groups whose identity includes involvement in illegal activities" (Weerman et al., 2009, 20). Two of the gangs, one comprised primarily of African American members and the other comprised primarily of Latino members, were mixed-gender and larger in size. The other four gangs were smaller gangs, also of mixed-gender, and had diverse racial makeup. Participants self-identified as gang members, an approach that has been demonstrated to be a strong predictor of embeddedness in gangs (Decker, Pyrooz, Sweeten, & Moule, 2014). In addition, participants had to be 14 to 19 years old and able to provide informed assent. Study participants were recruited via targeted sampling methods and sampling occurred until we achieved diversity in race and gender.

Two research assistants, an African American female and Latino male with years of community experience, conducted direct street outreach in neighborhoods with known gang activity, at street festivals, parks, and local community organizations. Participants completed written informed assent prior to screening given the sensitivity of the screening questions. The consent form was read verbatim and participants were given the opportunity to ask any questions. We received a waiver of parental consent for minors below the age of 18.

Interviews took place in a variety of community-based settings, lasted approximately 1 hour, and were conducted in English. Using a semi-structured interview guide, we asked participants about their history of gang involvement (including when and why they joined the gang, how they were initiated, and their current gang activities), positive and negative aspects of gang involvement, gender roles within the gang, drug and alcohol use, and sexual practices and relationships. Upon completion of the interview, participants received two referral cards to recruit additional gang members into the study. Participants received US\$30 for participating and an additional US\$10 for referring additional eligible participants. Informed consent and project protocols were reviewed and approved by the institutional review board at The Medical College of Wisconsin.

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using MAXQDA qualitative software. We coded all transcripts by gender, ethnicity, and gang affiliation, to allow for the exploration of differences among gangs or across gender and ethnicity of gang members. Transcripts were analyzed to identify primary coding categories and themes, and a codebook was created to capture broad content areas and key analytical concepts evident across interviews. Codes were refined using an iterative process throughout the analysis. As additional interviews were conducted and new themes emerged, changes to the coding tree and refinement of codes occurred after discussion with the research team.

We analyzed the transcripts for emergent themes and patterns using thematic content analysis. Analysis explored norms and expectations of sexual behaviors and substance use, the role of and attitudes toward female gang members, initiation practices, and condom use. We also analyzed data across each of the gangs to understand how differences in gang complexity and hierarchy might affect gang norms and expectations around sex and drug use behaviors. Quotations and narrative accounts included are representative of ideas, thoughts, or experiences that presented as themes across multiple interviews, or highlight differing or contradictory experiences, thoughts, or attitudes. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

Results

Participants ranged in age from 14 to 19, with an average age of nearly 18 years old, and reported joining the gang between the ages of 10 and 16 (mean of 13.5 years). There were 26 young women (45%) and 32 men (55%), and more than two thirds (64%) of participants were African American. The remaining participants were Latino (22%) or Latino and Black/African American (14%). All participants were sexually active. In addition to risky sexual behaviors, gang members had conventional sexual relationships and experiences, including steady, monogamous relationships. Similarly, gang members participated in sexual practices,

including unprotected sex; sex with multiple, concurrent partners; and sex while under the influence of alcohol or drugs in a manner similar to many adolescents. Although important, they fall outside our scope, as we focus on sexual risk behaviors in relation to gang norms and dynamics.

Sexual Initiation

The role of sex within gangs is initially evident in gang initiation rites, namely, “sexing-in,” wherein prospective female gang members have sex with multiple male gang members to gain membership. Participants reported joining the gang between the ages of 10 and 16, and nearly all were sexually active prior to joining the gang. While other recent research has suggested gang membership and entry are rather fluid and informal (J. Miller, 1998a; Peterson, 2012), the vast majority of participants in this study reported formal methods of initiation including being jumped or beat, blessed-in (admitted to the gang due to family ties, and not subject to any initiation rituals), or sexed-in. Sexing-in is unique in that it highlights hierarchical gender roles within the gang, exposes gang members to sexual risk, and is often among the first times female gang members are sexually objectified within the gang (Ulloa et al., 2012).

The prevalence of sexual initiation in this sample is difficult to discern, perhaps due to the sensitivity and difficult nature of the conversation regarding this topic. Members often provided conflicting accounts and only two girls reported experiencing sexual initiation, although sexual initiation is thought to be underreported by girls (Knox, 2004). Eleven of the 29 boys interviewed described participating in sexing-in girls, four had watched girls get sexed into their gang, and the others had just heard of girls getting sexed-in. Thus, our data on sexual initiation overwhelmingly rely on secondhand accounts (i.e., those who witnessed or heard about such events), gang members’ perceptions of the girls who are sexed-in, and the experiences of boys who participate in sexing-in, rather than the experiences of the girls who were sexed-in themselves. One participant, Shawndra, a 17-year-old African American female, was sexed into her gang when she was 14:

Shawndra: I had to do sex jobs with somebody to be in and that’s what happened ... they just told you what you had to do.

Interviewer: How many people did you have to do these sex jobs with?

Shawndra: Five.

Interviewer: How did that make you feel while you were doing it?

Shawndra: Disgusted, but it was like, whatever, I’m doing it.

Girls generally discussed sexing-in as a choice made by sexually promiscuous girls, or those who were not “tough” enough to withstand being jumped-in (i.e., beaten in). Others described sexing-in as an extension of perceived normative promiscuity for some girls.

Oh, well, it never fails. We have hood rats everywhere, we really do. I mean, there’s some people that are just willing to degrade themselves. I guess they think it’s okay or they’re used to it. I never knew what to make of it. But, like I said, I guess we just have our hood rats everywhere. (Nadine, 19-year-old Latina female)

This process of “othering” among female gang members established a rigid dichotomy and hierarchy among girls themselves, possibly as a mechanism to establish or uphold their own sexual respectability and status in a culture of male dominance and sexual exploitation (J. Miller & Decker, 2001; Schalet, Hunt, & Joe-Laidler, 2003).

Although Nadine and other girls discussed sexing-in as a choice, the degree of choice was not so clear and seemed to vary by gang. More than half of the male participants described sexual initiation as the default method for girls in their gang, except in certain exceptional circumstances such as if the girl had a male relative already in the gang, was perceived to be a “tough girl,” or was gay.

Interviewer: So for girls to be initiated they have to be sexed-in?

Dakota: Yes. Unless you get one of the girls that they think that they’re guys. They ain’t dealing with sex, so they take the beating. But the other ones, the straight women, they’re sex. It’s the sex action with them. (19-year-old African American male)

According to the sentiments of many male participants, girls were generally not given a choice of initiation method. It was often only girls’ sexuality that recused them from sexual initiation; straight girls are expected to have sex, while gay or bisexual girls, the “girls that think that they’re guys,” can be beat in. Although girls who identified as gay or bisexual were openly accepted into these gangs, homosexuality among male participants was strictly forbidden and members noted that a gay male in the gang risked severe physical harm. Despite these mixed perceptions of choice, girls who were sexed-in did not explicitly label their initiation as rape or even force, yet they also did not consider it a choice. While the extent of choice and force in sexual initiation practices for prospective female gang members remains unclear, the fact that the girls who were sexed-in perceive a lack of choice is significant and reflects the intricacies of gang membership and initiation.

Sexing-in also acts as a way for potential gang members to prove their loyalty and worthiness to the gang and demonstrate their willingness to abide by gang expectations, despite any potential risks, including sexual risk. Similarly, it provides opportunities for male members to demonstrate their masculinity via sexual dominance. As Adorjan explained, participating in sexing-in without condoms is indicative of both initiates’ and members’ dedication to the gang.

You come around, you want to be part of this clique, you got to show your devotion, and one way of showing that devotion is getting raw down ... meaning, there’s no condoms or nothing there. You just get raw down. You get did when they tell you to get did. (Adorjan)

Later, when asked whether he uses a condom when sexing-in female members, he said,

Oh yeah, I do, I try to protect, but nobody does. They bring them [girls] in, like literally, straight off the street, just like going to get a job interview. She wants in. Okay, who is she? Boom, let’s see how down she is—right there, raw, raw down. (19-year-old Hispanic male)

As he explained, girls who want to be part of the gang can demonstrate their devotion to the gang and how “down” they are through unprotected sexual initiation. Adorjan’s statements also reinforced one of the central tenets inherent in gang membership: The security and stability of the gang depends on the dedication and loyalty of its members. Initiation is an opportunity for new recruits to prove their dedication to the gang and for existing male members to prove their loyalty and demonstrate masculinity by assuming the risk with the initiate.

Gender Roles and Power Dynamics

The early sexual objectification of girls via sexing-in was often a gateway to additional sexual expectations and mistreatment by members of their own gang. This was especially true for girls who did not have “protection” from male members within the gang (e.g., a boyfriend or male relatives). As both male and female participants explained, sexual initiation led girls to be perceived as promiscuous and sexually available, often at an early age, and began to reify gender norms and gang hierarchies. In part, these gender roles were defined by the ways girls were initiated. Sexing-in positioned girls in a way that increased their risk of ongoing mistreatment from fellow gang members. In contrast, girls who were “jumped-in” were often viewed as “tough girls,” with roles and responsibilities similar to male members.

It’s just how they got brought into the gang. If they lay on their back, well, we’re going to consider them tricks. If they got beat in, then you know, they’re one of the guys ... I mean, you know, we’re guys. We do that shit like, whatever. It’s just, I mean, to us it’s just a female that we can have. (Eamon, 19-year-old Hispanic male)

A hierarchy among female gang members becomes established, wherein girls who were sexed-in are devalued and thought of, and treated as, sex objects and “property” of male gang members. Referred to as “hos” and “tricks,” girls who were sexed-in lacked the same level of respect that other girls received within the gang, and were expected to be sexually available to boys, justified by their “willingness” to be sexed-in. Boys discussed “running trains” with these girls, or forcing the girl to have sex with several different male members in a row. Girls who were sexed-in continued to be sexualized by the boys and “tough girls,” were considered inferior, and were expected to maintain subservient roles, reinforcing a gendered hierarchy within the gang.

Man, whenever you feel like having sex, they gotta do it. They can’t say no. It’s always gotta be yes, especially if they’re our gang chicks, you know what I mean? They gotta carry dope for us if we want them to. They do a lot man. They ain’t just regular chicks, man. These are no educated females. These are the girls that took the other route like bad dudes, you know what I mean? (Eamon, 19-year-old Hispanic male).

As Eamon indicated, once a girl “chooses” to be sexed-in, she has little choice in whether or not to have sex, when to have sex, or with whom as a gang member. This was echoed by members of other gangs as well. As Nevaeh, a 19-year-old African American woman who had watched girls get sexed into her gang, noted,

They have sex to get in the gang. They're brought in the gang basically for people to have sex with them. They're the ho's of the gang ... and she already knows what the deal is. That's how you were brought in, so you can't really say no. You gotta have sex with all these guys.

Although members repeatedly suggested that how a girl was initiated determined her role and status, gender dynamics and sexual expectations were far more complex. Girls who were jumped or blessed-in often discussed the inferiority and sexual promiscuity of other girls, yet would later recount their own experiences of forced sexual encounters and sexual expectations from fellow gang members. For example, Jada is a member of the same gang as Nevaeh. She is bisexual, considered a "stud" in the gang, and, as a result, was jumped-in by about 10 male members of her gang (girls who are jumped-in generally fight other girls). Yet, not long after her initiation, she was forced to have sex with another male gang member.

After my jump-in, the leader actually came to me, probably like two, three weeks later and told me I have to have sex with a guy ... It felt like my pride was stepped on, but at the same time—you know, leader came and spoke with me and let me know it wasn't fair because majority of the girls actually had to get sexed-in and with those girls, it was more than one guy. When it happened with me, it was just like one guy. (Jada)

Later, in discussing other experiences of forced sex she goes on to say,

We probably had to do a couple of threesomes that we didn't want to do, but— It was just—that's how the leader felt at the time. You know, his rules. (18-year-old African American female)

Although she identified herself as a "tough girl," she was still subject to the same sexual roles as other girls in the gang. Jada felt this demotion in status when she stated that she "felt like my pride was stepped on." Jada's narrative revealed that although "tough girls" may not be subject to sexual initiation and the subsequent social devaluation associated with it, their sexual experiences as gang members may not be all that different from those of other girls.

Sexual Regrets

Commonly, gang members noted inherent pressure and unspoken expectations as gang members had to participate in certain gang activities. These sexual expectations often included stereotyped gender roles, including domination over girls and the hypersexuality of males, perceived as implicit characteristics of gang members. Participants frequently reported participating in high-risk sexual activities within the gang, including inconsistent condom use, group or "train" sex, and sex parties. Although approximately half of the female participants reported engaging in group sex, all reported having watched or heard about group sex within their own gang. Male participants, however, overwhelmingly acknowledged having participated in group sex. Yet, they did not report an uncritical complacency with these sexual gang norms. Rather, a tension existed between gang members' actions and their thoughts and feelings about these behaviors. Although most participants cited engaging in one or more of these high-risk behaviors, more than half simultaneously noted discomfort and a subsequent regret about their participation.

For male gang members, their discomfort with the sexual coercion and exploitation of girls was central to their regret. One participant, for example, explained the tension between feeling pressured to participate in “running a train” involving 10 males and one female member, and his discomfort with his behavior.

It’s like a little remorse there ’cause I got sisters and I got a momma. But then it’s like the life we live. It’s like a—you know, a fit in thing. It’s just looking at it like we was like drinking together and smoking a blunt, just having fun. (John, 18-year-old African American male)

This pressure to sexually exploit girls and display sexual power may be partially attributable to masculinity norms and efforts of these young men to gain power and respect via sex. Girls similarly expressed regret for participating in group sex, although more often their regrets seemed to be associated with feeling exploited or coerced into participating in sexual encounters by fellow gang members. The violation of expectations about how they would be treated and respected as gang members frequently led to remorse:

I regret having a threesome ... because it was two friends and it’s two members of my gang.... I felt horrible. Like, I looked at them as brothers and never thought anything like that would happen. (Dalila, 18-year-old African American female)

Dalila’s regret stems from a violation of trust from members of their own gang. The discomfort seemed to be magnified by the fact that these sexual experiences and violations of trust were with individuals they considered “brothers” or with whom they were particularly close. Although not blood relatives, these are members of their gang, often described as “family,” whom they have come to depend on emotionally, socially, and financially.

While some participants cited perceptions of peer pressure, others had a difficult time articulating why they participated in certain activities, attributing their behaviors merely to part of “the life.” Furthermore, although many were explicit about regrets or discomfort surrounding instances of group or unprotected sex, a few discussed those experiences as seemingly normal aspects of their sexual lives, without major distinction from other sexual encounters and relationships. This was often evident when participants discussed the role of sex at parties, where sex was common and often expected.

These parties, they can get out of hand. Stuff happens. I’ve definitely seen [girls] forced to have sex with male gang members on more than one occasion, you know ... You look at it one way, it ain’t right, but when you look at it another way, you know, this is the life. This is the stuff we do. Just, it is what it is. (Jafar, 18-year-old Hispanic male)

Within the gang, substance use, namely, alcohol and marijuana, was ubiquitous, and often cited as the mechanism that facilitated group or train sex, inconsistent condom use, and other sexual regrets. Substance use was occasionally used to explain compliance with risky gang norms and social situations and a rationalization for behaviors later regretted. As Brittni described, excessive drug and alcohol use, and subsequent sexual regrets, could become routine aspects of gang membership. She recounted several instances of participating in group sex while under the influence of alcohol and drugs.

Interviewer: When it's over, how do you feel?

Brittini: Besides hung over, sometimes I feel bad, you know, but you gotta kinda get used to that. You don't think about what happened last night 'cause a lot of nights you do a lot of shit that you don't wanna do anyway.

Similarly, Laprell discussed how he felt following group sex within the gang involving ecstasy and marijuana:

I didn't like it after, and if I had a normal mind, I probably would never did some of the stuff I did ... had to force them or something like that. It felt good after, but after awhile, I didn't like it because I have to think of my sister and my mother.
(Laprell, 17-year-old African American male)

These passages highlight the internal distress alluded to by many participants; although there was a clear discomfort with participation in certain activities, there was a simultaneous facade of indifference about these risky, often uncomfortable and unwanted situations and gang norms often superseded individual ambivalence. Yet, gang members' discomfort with these behaviors and situations suggests that although they may be willing to endure such experiences, they still recognize them as problematic and do not necessarily condone them. Thus, gang members may face difficult choices around sexual behaviors: agree to the expected practices to reap the perceived and tangible benefits of gang membership, or not be part of the gang and forego those benefits. This may be exacerbated for female members, who may face continued sexual objectification and exploitation as a requirement of gang membership.

Discussion

Sexual risk behaviors, including sexual initiation and group sex, can increase group cohesion and reinforce gendered hierarchies and power differentials. Female gang members are at particularly high risk for unwanted sexual encounters, often justified by males through unspoken expectations and norms about "the life." Girls, while not explicitly labeling experiences as rape, expressed feelings of betrayal in unwanted sexual experiences with fellow gang members. Girls spoke openly about experiences of sexual coercion and exploitation, and rigid gender norms and expectations about masculinity within the gang may inhibit girls' abilities to negotiate safe sex or opt out of certain sexual activities. The prevalence of sexual initiation within gangs remains unclear, as participants provided conflicting accounts. Importantly, however, a much greater percentage of girls reported forced or unwanted sexual experiences once they were members of the gang. Thus, although formal sexual initiation may be infrequent, expectations persist that girls remain sexually available to male members.

Participants noted that girls who were gay or adopted a more masculine demeanor were theoretically freed from the sexual expectations placed upon other girls. Unlike boys, girls could engage in same-sex intimacy and be in openly gay relationships without facing similar threats of violence or exclusion. This stands in contrast to other research which has found overt homosexuality among women in gangs to be reprehensible and stigmatized (W. B. Miller, 2011). Although numerous gang members explained that the hierarchy of respect and

power within the gang was directly related to how girls were initiated, the “tough girls” were not always protected from sexual expectations or forced sexual encounters. It may be that gender norms and their associated sexual expectations are more entrenched than some of the girls would like to believe. It is also possible that sexual expectations of all women in the gang are associated with men’s desire to demonstrate their masculinity and dominance.

Many male members felt regret over their participation in various sexual activities, yet the power and significance of the gang in their lives seemed to override their individual beliefs and sense of morality about the issues. In contexts and situations where sexual exploitation of women is tolerated and high rates of sexual activity are the norm, group norms often supersede individual beliefs and morality (Martin & Hummer, 1989). As previous research has demonstrated, youth rarely join gangs as an opportunity to participate in violent or deviant behavior, but rather, these behaviors may be best understood as a by-product of efforts to assert masculinity (Baird, 2012). Particularly relevant for young African American and Latino men, exclusion from the labor market, limited educational opportunities, and low socioeconomic status may lead them to seek out other opportunities to establish masculinity (Flavin, 2001). As a result, these behaviors and efforts to garner respect become norms embedded within gangs, accepted by both male and female gang members.

Although many members of the gang privately rejected normative sexual expectations, they frequently publicly affirmed and reproduced these norms due to a desire to fit in with the group and avoid ridicule and social isolation. Throughout the interviews, male gang members espoused sexist attitudes and sentiments, often suggesting girls were merely in the gang for the boys’ sexual pleasure. Yet, many simultaneously noted internal conflict and regret about various behaviors and attitudes, which may be partially explained by the context of the gang and its group dynamics. As noted in previous research, gang norms and values tend to have more significant influence among male gang members, and their self-esteem and perceptions of masculinity are more tightly bound to adherence and commitment to gang practices (W. B. Miller, 2011). In our study, most male gang members expressed ambivalence about group sex and sexing-in, but reported that it was “just part of the life,” highlighting how the gang upheld gender expectations and stereotypes.

Our results highlight the complexity involved in sexual risk behaviors within gangs and demonstrate the need for interventions at the gang and community levels. For example, gang-level interventions are needed to reduce the gang norms that reinforce sexual risk behaviors and increase opportunities for girls to have more control over sexual decision making. Such interventions must include opportunities to modify norms within the gang around gendered hierarchies and sexual risk behaviors, including those that reduce intimate partner violence. As we, and previous research, have revealed, perpetration of sexual violence and exploitation may be rooted in expected practices and masculine ideals of strength, control, and success (Jewkes et al., 2015). Rather than targeting individual risk behaviors, interventions that seek to address social norms, relationship norms, and ideas about masculinity may be important (Jewkes et al., 2015). Furthermore, as many of the risky sexual practices serve to reinforce the cohesiveness of the gang, such interventions must be developed in collaboration with gang members to ensure that content is acceptable and will not result in repercussions to members who participate in the intervention or attempt to

change norms. In addition, any efforts to address adolescent gangs must account for and seek to modify the structural inequality that contribute to the development of gangs. For example, the marginalization of minority youth and their exclusion from traditional opportunities to express masculinity (e.g., well-paying jobs) may contribute to seeking out gangs as an opportunity to achieve status and power. Interventions should account for these complex contextual influences including racial and economic neighborhood segregation, disparities in public school funding and resources, and the disproportionate rates of incarceration for racial and ethnic minorities.

Limitations

Findings from this sample cannot be generalized to all gang members, as they reflect the nature and structure of gangs in an urban, Midwestern city. In addition, this study relied on self-report data on a number of sensitive topics and participants may have over or underreported sexual behaviors. However, our findings were based on themes that presented across multiple interviews rather than single narrative accounts, thereby increasing the validity of gang members' reports and providing support for the existence of such practices.

A small number of Latina gang members refused to participate in the study. Research assistants informally heard from Latina gang members that male members told them they could not participate, later confirmed by interviewed Latino boys. As a result, only 22% of the sample identified as Latino and only two Latina girls participated. Finally, the gangs involved in this research were mixed-gender, male-dominated gangs, which likely shaped the expression and perception of gender norms, gang hierarchy, and high-risk sexual behaviors within the gang. Girls who are members of female-only gangs may have different experiences worth exploring. In addition, more research is needed to allow girls continued opportunities to tell their stories and provide greater insight into the extent of their choices in sexual decision making and their thoughts and processes in navigating the complex decisions they do make.

Finally, it is important to note that the principal investigator and authors of this manuscript are White women in academia: We acknowledge that our race, gender, and class may influence our perspectives and approach to this study and data analysis. To address this, we convened a diverse Community Advisory Board throughout the duration of the study to provide guidance on approach, interpretation of findings, and intervention opportunities. In addition, the research assistants who conducted the interviews were a Latino male and African American female, both of whom regularly offered feedback and insight into the study and its findings.

Conclusion

Despite these limitations, this study offers a unique contribution to the field and is among the first to fully explore the extent of group sexual practices within gangs from the perspectives of male and female members. Data from the quantitative phase of this study will provide additional information on the differences in risk between male and female gang members and among gangs of different ethnicities and sizes to appropriately tailor

interventions. Supplementing our qualitative interviews with quantitative data will also provide a comprehensive picture of adolescent gang members' risk behaviors and will inform a multi-level risk reduction intervention to begin addressing the complex clusters of high-risk behaviors evident within gangs. Interventions to reduce harm and minimize risk behaviors among adolescent gang members will require an acknowledgment of the influence of gang and gender norms, structure, and power dynamics on risk and the ways in which such phenomena can constrict decision making around sexual behavior.

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