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In Search of Popularity: Non-Conforming Reputations of Hispanic Adolescent Graffiti Writers

Abstract Although the literature on graffiti writers continues to expand, there is a paucity of studies on Hispanic adolescent writers in the U.S., especially with a focus on assimilation. Using the qualitative analyses of in-depth interviews with Hispanic adolescent writers, this study attempts to fill in the gaps in our understanding of whether and how ethnologies of writers differ with respect to their family-, school-, and peer-related experiences. A key feature of the study is comparison of two crews (groups) of Hispanic adolescent writers who differ with respect to their immigrant generational status. Above all, this paper seeks an understanding of the purpose behind the graffiti-writing behavior. The findings of this study underscore the importance of boundary-testing, status- and risk-seeking in the lives of adolescent writers who, through the engagement in graffiti-writing, attempt to establish a non-conforming reputation among one's peers.

Keywords Hispanic Graffiti Writers; Adolescence; Establishing Reputation; Assimilation; Immigrant Generational Status

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Adolescence is characterized by an increasing role of peers and a burgeoning sense of self (Coleman 1961; Kreager 2007; McElhaney, Antonishak, and Allen 2008). The former often manifests itself through questioning the conventional normative system imposed by the adults (Coleman 1961; Kreager 2007; Carroll et al. 2009). The desire to establish a status among one's peers, which is prevalent in the lives of most adolescents, is often accompanied by engagement in risk-taking, boundary-testing, and rule-breaking activities (France 2000; Kreager

2007; Carroll et al. 2009). While many young people undoubtedly engage in risk-taking activities during their teen years, they largely remain productively involved in the mainstream youth culture. Only a few become estranged from the mainstream. These youths are subjects of the present study.

The focus of this project is on a particular risk-taking activity—graffiti-writing. The study is based on ethnographical fieldwork the author carried out with two groups of Hispanic adolescent graffiti writers in Hidalgo County, one of the southernmost counties of Texas located on the U.S.-Mexico border. In-depth qualitative interviews with adolescents/young adults were analyzed using NVivo software. The current article attempts to bridge the lacunae in the existing research on graffiti writers by: (1) focusing on adolescence as a transitional period associated with increased self-awareness, identity development, and rebelliousness; (2) investigating the Hispanic adolescent writers' lives in the context of different socialization domains—family, school, and peer influences; and (3) examining the importance of immigrant generational status as an underlying factor of involvement in graffiti-writing as a high-risk activity. The study incorporates valuable insights from research on delinquency and assimilation of Hispanic adolescents (Buriel, Calzada, and Vasquez 1982; Sommers, Fagan, and Baskin 1993; Vega et al. 1993; McQueen, Getz, and Bray 2003), as well as more current literature on adolescent graffiti writers (Taylor, Houghton, and Bednall 2010; Valle and Weiss 2010; Taylor 2012; Taylor, Marais, and Cottman 2012). In this study, gender and ethnicity are controlled because all participants are male and Hispanic. Important themes that emerged from

the qualitative analysis of participants' interviews include isolation, boredom, despise of the adults controlling their lives, bullying, student fights, and others.

Theoretical Background

Two literatures inform the current study. The first is on adolescent delinquency and assimilation.¹ There are a few studies that have been dedicated to the assimilation effects on delinquency of Hispanic youth in the United States: Mexican-American (Buriel et al. 1982; Samaniego and Gonzales 1999; McQueen et al. 2003), Puerto Rican (Sommers et al. 1993), and Cuban-American (Vega et al. 1993) adolescents. All this research does not focus on graffiti-writing as a specific type of delinquent behavior, is based on the analyses of quantitative data, and, for the most part, has been published two decades ago. Of more direct relevance to this study is an article of Buriel and colleagues (1982) with which I share a common focus on Mexican-Americans. The argument advanced by Buriel and colleagues (1982) is that embeddedness in traditional Mexican-American culture and the psychological advantages associated with it discourage juvenile delinquency. The findings generally confirm to the authors' expectations and show that the higher generations of Mexican-Americans are more prone to juvenile delinquency than the more recent generations of their co-ethnics. A noteworthy methodological feature of Buriel and colleagues' (1982) research, a feature shared with the present study,

¹ Adolescent delinquency is typically defined as activities that place youth at risk for adjudication, that is, violating the juvenile code (Haynie 2001). Most studies examined below use a general rather than offense-specific measure of delinquency.

is the use of generational status as the measure of assimilation. It is important to note that this methodological innovation allows placing Buriel and colleagues (1982) within a larger paradigm of classical assimilation research (e.g., Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Bean and Stevens 2003).

Similar methodological approaches have been advanced by studies rooted in segmented assimilation theory, perhaps the dominant theoretical development in the field of immigrant incorporation today (Zhou 1997; Hirschman 2001; Portes and Rumbaut 2001). In brief, the theory contends for divergent pathways of assimilation that is largely dependent on the context of reception—the way the established residents of the host society perceive and categorize immigrants. The context of reception, whether positive or negative, may result in, respectively, either upward or downward mobility for various immigrant groups. Empirical studies stemming from segmented assimilation theory and conducted on Hispanic immigrant groups confirm that the downward assimilation is likely for Mexican-Americans and Puerto Ricans (Tienda 1989; Aponte 1991; Massey 1993). Perhaps, one of the most visible characteristics of downward assimilation that some scholars point to is a pattern of ethnic enclaves of concentrated poverty in which many underprivileged Hispanic children are raised (Massey 1993). In the absence of middle-class models to follow, in fragile family environments, young people in the neighborhoods of concentrated poverty often become marginalized and alienated (Cuciti and James 1990; Massey 1993). These circumstances have given rise to a collective oppositional culture, a frame of reference that aggressively rejects mainstream

behaviors and undermines academic achievement (Small and Newman 2001). Locales where oppositional culture thrives provide a breeding ground for self-consciously dissident and rebellious youths. These types of locales are where graffiti-writing typically proliferates (Martinez 1997; Taylor 2012).²

Overall, a brief survey of the extant literature concerned with assimilation and adolescent delinquency suggests that there is a link between immigrant generation and delinquency. Regardless of the outcomes, whether measured in terms of school performance, aspirations, or behavior, the first generation of Hispanic immigrants usually do better academically, health-wise, et cetera than higher generation immigrants owing to the protective character of ethnic cultural norms infused in them by their families and communities (Hirschman 2001; Portes and Rumbaut 2001). However, the protective nature of traditional culture becomes eroded with time: the longer the U.S. residence, the worse the outcomes (Bui and Thongniramol 2005).

As mentioned above, prior research on Hispanic adolescent antisocial behavior is represented almost exclusively by quantitative studies. The present project departs significantly from this tradition in several respects. First of all, in as much as I would like to place this study within the quantitative tradition, I could not avail myself of any national or

² It should be noted here that the setting of the current study is Hidalgo County, Texas. It is located in the Rio Grande Valley, which is not only one of the fastest growing regions in the U.S. but also one of the poorest. The region frequently leads the nation in unemployment and poverty and ranks near the bottom nationally in per capita income (Bishaw 2011; Su et al. 2011). The region's population is predominantly Hispanic. More than 90% of local residents are Mexican-Americans (Su et al. 2011).

regional survey data on adolescent graffiti writers in the U.S. Although there exists a number of national databases on adolescent delinquents, none of them specifically focused on graffiti writers. Moreover, despite the fact that graffiti-writing is a criminal offence under the law of Texas (as well as in the rest of the U.S.), according to prior studies, many graffiti writers escape being caught by the police, and thus do not face criminal charges (Lachmann 1988; Ferrell 1995). It is not surprising therefore that graffiti writers are an under-surveyed population and the vast majority of prior studies of graffiti writers, both adult and adolescent ones, are qualitative.

A body of qualitative research on graffiti writers, beginning with Lachmann (1988) and still expanding, suggests that graffiti-writing is a collective enterprise: the majority of graffiti writers work in “crews,” teams of like-minded peers. As Valle and Weiss (2010:134) put it, “On crews, graffiti artists prepare paintings in a joint manner, pool money for the necessary paint, comment collectively on their experiences after painting, and interact in broad emotional sociality at parties.” In addition, graffiti writers “identify their peers as an audience” (Lachmann 1988:241). Therefore, a second literature which has attracted less research so far, but proved to be germane to the questions discussed here is on the role of peers and peer groups in graffiti-writing.

Although the literature on the subject of peer groups and adolescent antisocial behavior is abundant, only a few studies focused on adolescent graffiti writers and their friendship associations. In this respect, the most relevant research has been published only recently. Of special interest to the current project are

studies by Taylor and her colleagues (Taylor et al. 2010; Taylor 2012; Taylor et al. 2012). All aforementioned studies specifically investigate reasons why some adolescents are attracted to the world of graffiti-writing. In order to determine the reasons behind graffiti-writing behavior, Taylor (2012) conducted qualitative analyses of media reports and Internet sources. She found that the majority of adolescent graffiti writers are addicted to risk and that they specifically set goals to attain a non-conforming social identity.³ It is precisely because of this addiction to a risky pleasure, the author contended, recidivist “graffers” need to be treated by mental health professionals.⁴ Taylor ended her paper with calling to the attention of mental health professionals to recidivist graffiti writers and implications for future research. The findings of Taylor and colleagues (2012) reiterated the argument put forward by Taylor (2012) that graffiti-writing is often an obsessive activity. Using the data provided by Western Australian Police, the authors found that the majority of writers in the police database were recidivist offenders involved in multiple crimes.

The book by Taylor and colleagues (2010) differs from the two aforementioned studies in several respects. Firstly, the authors' focus is on adolescent risk-taking as such and not specifically on graffiti-writing.

³ Similar findings are reported by Othen-Price (2006) who observes that many adolescent writers are obsessed with adrenaline rush. Othen-Price's study is, however, deeply rooted in psychoanalysis and no references are made by the author to social science paradigms.

⁴ The concepts “graffer” and “tagger” are used in the present study interchangeably. This is due to two reasons: (1) subjects themselves used these terms interchangeably in their narratives, and (2) all writers I interviewed were engaged only in “tagging”; in other words, there were no “muralists” in my sample (for more on the difference between “taggers” and “muralists,” see: Lachmann 1988).

The researchers compared two groups of adolescent risk-takers—"graffers" and skate-borders. Secondly, because the authors took a broad view of risk-taking and non-conforming behaviors among adolescents, a distinct theoretical model was used to guide qualitative analyses. Reputation enhancing goals theory was claimed by the authors as the theoretical basis of their study. Reputation enhancing goals theory is a recent theoretical development by Carroll and colleagues (see: Carroll et al. 2009 for details). In essence, reputation enhancing goals theory integrates elements of better-known reputation enhancement (Emler, Reicher, and Ross 1987; Emler and Reicher 1995) and goal-setting theories (Locke and Latham 1984; Locke and Latham 1990). Briefly, reputation enhancement theory posits that individuals choose a self-image and promote it before an audience of their peers, while goal-setting theory claims that conscious goals regulate human behavior. When applied to adolescent antisocial behaviors, the integrated reputation enhancing goals theory presumes that adolescents who do not fit into the mainstream culture deliberately opt for antisocial activities in order to pursue a non-conforming reputation. To gain visibility among their peers, adolescents communicate their social identities through deliberate, observable behavior (Carroll et al. 2013). Furthermore, to acquire and maintain a deviant (oppositional) identity requires an audience, and without the social support of a peer group a delinquent (or non-delinquent) reputation is hard to sustain (Emler et al. 1987; Carroll et al. 2009). The feedback received from the audience assists adolescents in maintaining their deviant identity within a relatively stable community of peers who share common interests (Carroll et al. 2009; Carroll et al. 2013).

Until now, there have been relatively few serious attempts in the social sciences to empirically test premises of reputation enhancing goals theory (one of them is the aforementioned study by Taylor et al. [2010]). In addition, there are no known studies that look specifically at immigrant generational status as a differentiating variable related to the experiences of Hispanic graffiti writers. The present article intends to provide empirical evidence with regard to reputation enhancement goals theory's relevance to the study of adolescent graffiti writers. This study is also an attempt to incorporate the effect of immigrant generational status in the investigation of reasons why some Hispanic adolescents become involved (and maintain their involvement) in antisocial types of activities, such as graffiti-writing.

Method

The interview sample was compiled with the assistance of high school counselors working with "problem" adolescents in two high schools in McAllen-Edinburg-Mission Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) of Hidalgo County, Texas, and by participants recruiting other participants (subjects were encouraged to refer other graffiti writers to the author). As a result of the recruitment process, 11 adolescents who were self-identified as "the former graffiti artists" accepted the invitation to participate in the study. All my respondents were born in the United States, but also were male, 18-20 years of age, and Hispanic. Consequently, by having a rather uniform sample of adolescents, the current study controls for gender, age, ethnicity, and nativity status. All participants referred themselves as "prolific," "bombing tag," but "retired" writers. Two adoles-

cents asked that their interviews not be audio taped. Nine interviews were audio taped and analyzed for the present study. All subjects are referred to with pseudonyms in this article.

At the time of the interview, all but two participants had graduated from high school. Out of these nine participants, 5 attended one high school in the aforementioned MSA and 4 attended the other. Accordingly, I identified two groups (crews) of "graffers" on the basis of their mutual acquaintances/collaborations, as well as the high schools they attended: crew 1 (consisting of 5 members) and crew 2 (consisting of 4 members). Members of both crew 1 and crew 2 communicated almost exclusively among themselves in English. However, Spanish was the exclusive language spoken in homes of crew 1, while the primary language spoken in homes of crew 2 was English. As it became known to the author of this article after the interviews had been completed, parents of crew 1 members' were all born in Mexico or Central America, while parents of crew 2 members' were all native-born. Essentially, the difference between crew 1 and crew 2 can be conceptualized as the difference between second generation and third generation immigrants. Following Hirschman (2001) and Portes and Rumbaut (2001), I define the second generation as the U.S.-born children of foreign-born parents and the third generation as those who themselves and whose parents were born in the U.S. The former category (also often referred to as the "third-plus generation") is commonly considered native population.

Prior to the interviews, permission to conduct the research had been obtained from the Institution-

al Review Board (IRB) of the University of Texas Pan-American. Interview questions were developed by the author and endorsed by the IRB. It has to be noted that 7 participants were older than 18 years of age at the time of the interview and 2 were younger. Prior to the interview, the author/interviewer contacted future participants by phone, described the purpose of the study, and answered participants' questions. Per the author/interviewer's suggestion, future participants who were minors at the time of the interview asked their parent(s) if they would allow them to participate in the study. After consent from parents of minors and adult participants had been acquired, the researcher/interviewer called participants to schedule an interview. A mutually convenient time for the interview was arranged. Interviews were conducted in an academic setting rather than at the participants' homes, under the assumption that participants would thus be more open to talk about their family.

Prior to the commencement of the interview, written consent forms from participants and, in the case of minors, from their parents were obtained and requirements of participation had been outlined. In this regard, participants had been given the opportunity to withdraw from the study without prejudice. All participants were also informed prior to the start of the interviews that if they did not feel comfortable in answering a particular question, then they could opt to pass to the next.

The study reported here is based on in-depth interviews and, as such, has analysis constraints attributable to the qualitative nature of the data. This includes subjective interpretations of events. This

subjectivity is often pointed out as a disadvantage of qualitative approaches (Vanderstoep and Johnson 2008; Russell and Ryan 2009). Given the purpose of the study to obtain rich qualitative data, the semi-structured interview format was used. The interviews acquired minimal-to-moderate structure by the use of a question guide containing only open-ended questions. This flexible format allowed for follow-up questions based on the participants' unplanned responses. Each interview started with a general conversation about the participant's family life and proceeded to other questions pertaining to school environment and peer groups. Responders were encouraged to discuss and reflect upon their experiences in their own words. The interviews were structured in the way that respondents were encouraged to reconstruct their past through the lens of their lives present and even imagined future. Participants were not restricted to answering the interview questions in any particular order. Thus, participants were given considerable liberty to pursue themes that were not covered in the interviewer's question list.

The grounded theory method was used in the analysis of the interview data. According to the founders of grounded theory, Glaser and Strauss (1967:45), it involves "the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyzes his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges." In essence, it is an inductive methodology which allows building up a theory derived from the data while keeping "theoretical sensitivity" in focus (Glaser 1992; Char-

maz 2006).⁵ Grounded theory involves the use of an intensive and iterative process that simultaneously involves data collection, coding, and theory building (Czarniawska 2004). Several strategies derived from the grounded theory methodology (Strauss and Corbin 1990), including open coding, category/theme generation, and exploring patterns across categories, were employed in this study.

Following this tradition, study findings were generated in a process where initial intuitive "hunches" became hypotheses, which were continuously tested, refined, and revised (or discarded completely) in light of more data collected, and which eventually began to form themes (Charmaz 2006). In practical terms, the main purpose of my use of grounded theory was to develop a dense description of themes. This was achieved through open coding, or breaking down each participant's responses into categories (a.k.a. nodes) that represented meaningful themes (Strauss and Corbin 1990).⁶ The purpose of creating categories is to provide a means of describing the phenomenon, to increase understanding, and to generate knowledge (Russell and Ryan 2009). The coding of text, more exactly, the assignment of categoring to the text, was not based on a preconceived theoretical model. The categories were as-

⁵ By "theoretical sensitivity" Glaser (1992) meant the ability of a researcher to abstract from the pre-conceived theoretical constructs, while constantly developing the insight into the research situation.

⁶ Out of three types of coding—open coding, axial coding, and selective coding—I chose the latter because it allows for greater flexibility in interpretation of results. Open coding means that notes and headings are written in the text while reading it. The written material is read through again, and as many headings as necessary are written down in the margins to describe all aspects of the content (Hsieh and Shannon 2005).

signed to a piece of text in the process of reading it and examining its structure. These categories were then refined and merged, eventually leading to a list of themes. The aim of grouping categories was to merge those that are similar into broader themes (Schreier 2012). The final list of themes included three items: family, school, and peers.

Results

Respondents primarily shared experiences involving their family, school, and peers. Therefore, the themes that emerged from the interview analysis are presented below under three themes—family, school, and peers. They are accompanied by quotations from the interviews and relevant references to previous research.

Family

All but two respondents (both from crew 1: Eddy and Homer) were raised either in incomplete (single-parent) or guardian (headed by relatives other than parents) families. Two of my interviewees were raised by guardians—aunts and uncles. "I was raised by my great aunt," said Fernando (crew 1), and later added: "I was adopted within our family." Mike (crew 2) narrated, "My aunt [Name] raised me from the age of five because my mom, her younger sister, had a drug addiction." The fact that my respondents were predominantly brought up in non-traditional families does not presuppose that they received less parental attention, supervision, care, et cetera. Nevertheless, the literature suggests that delinquents often come from homes that are dysfunctional through divorce, separation, deser-

tion, and death of one or both parents (McQueen et al. 2003).

It is also worth mentioning that family, including parents and siblings, constitutes the main informal and most enduring support group (Sommers et al. 1993). Unfortunately, I found that my respondents often lacked familial social support, especially as a buffer for stress in school. As it will be shown below, some of my respondents were bullied in school, and their parents/guardians exhibited minimal, if any, involvement in their child's life. The majority of my interviewees encountered indifference to their problems by their parents or guardians. There were also instances when interviewees reported being misunderstood and mistreated by their parents/guardians. Here is an exemplary quote: "My aunt never understands me. She's extremely one-sided... She only believes what she thinks is right and my uncle agrees with her all the time. They are quite a pair, you know..." (Mike, crew 2).

Moreover, as the stories conveyed by my interviewees show, they often struggled through the family conflict:

My mom and her boyfriend both messed up my life—we used to quarrel a lot...When I was about ten, my mom met this guy and started going to his house every night and would be home maybe once a week. Then she moved him in...And she liked to please him. She never started eating until he'd come home from work...She never started eating until he'd started to eat. Sometimes she used to stand behind his chair while he was eating. After the meal, she always cleaned up after him. And then she washed the

dishes...He started to complain about me, no matter what I do...And then my mom started lecturing me and yelling at me...And I talked back, of course. [Carlos, crew 2]

I hate my mom's boyfriend. They have been going out since I was eight...When they started out I thought he would be nicer to me. I was wrong. My mom does everything that he says...She never does anything without him... [Nat, crew 2]

My sister hates me because I don't do things that she likes. She's a control freak. She'd go through my things when I wasn't in my room...Nobody in my family treated me so badly...And if something bothers her, she takes things out on other people...When she broke up with her boyfriend, she made a scene...embarrassed me in front of my friends. [Victor, crew 1]

My parents had been fighting for years. I was nine when it [parents' divorce] happened. I remember that day. They both called me into the room to say that they are getting divorced...I didn't want to see them or talk to them for a long time...The divorce was so nasty...It was a mess like my dad's parents tried to hurt my mom... [Jake, crew 1]

There is also evidence that "graffers" were brought up in families that received little education: "My father didn't go to high school and my mother had to drop out of school when she was in eighth grade," recalled Homer (crew 1). I also found that most of my respondents came from financially strained families: "My mom never went to college, but she works hard. She works two jobs, but she doesn't make enough money for the family of four. She can't

buy me things I need, and when she does, I'll have to pay her back. I've just started working to help her..." (Eddy, crew 1); "My mom doesn't work. Her boyfriend is working his *** off every day at a hard job, though. He pays the rent, and the bills, and buys us things..." (Jake, crew 1).

My findings generally agree with the prior research indicating that children who grow up in incomplete families or in homes with considerable conflict are at the greatest risk of becoming delinquent (Flewelling and Bauman 1990; Sommers et al. 1993; Demuth and Brown 2004). An increasing number of studies suggests that the presence or absence of a parent may affect adolescent outcomes (e.g., Griffin et al. 2000; Demuth and Brown 2004). Further, adolescents from non-traditional (i.e., single-parent and non-parent/guardian) families are more likely to engage in risky and antisocial behaviors than adolescents from two-parent nuclear families (Flewelling and Bauman 1990). Similarly, adolescent delinquency has been linked to such factors as social support and socio-economic status (Barnes and Farrell 1992). Delinquents often come from homes with little social support and/or with low socio-economic status (Barnes and Farrell 1992; Griffin et al. 2000).

School

The first emergent theme in the interviews is the commonality of experiences of all writers in school. All the interviewees felt that they were "bored" in school and they did not "belong." They were not part of a larger high school culture, suffered from the absence of like-minded peers in school, and often felt that they dropped out from the daily routine.

Many agreed that the social life was bad, and a number complained about the academic atmosphere. The prevailing attitude towards the school can be exemplified by the following quote: "School was not going well at all. I got into fights. And a few other things have happened...I couldn't take anymore and I started cutting. [I] flunked a term because I've been missing school. The school sucked...I started... pretty much explore and hang out with friends and have a good time" (Carlos, crew 2).

Although all "graffers" indeed did not belong to the mainstream "crowd" in their respective schools, some of my interviewees managed to do well academically while being actively involved in graffiti-writing: "I wasn't a very good student, but I was a 'C' student all the time. I had a solid 'C'...I started cutting school in year ten to do what I like to do [graffiti]. I liked hanging with good guys [the crew]. I was cutting school and still ended year ten as a 'C' student" (Fernando, crew 1). Generally, it was more common for crew 1 members than crew 2 members to stress that, despite their interest in graffiti, they managed not only to finish high school, but also to sustain an acceptable level of academic achievement. Because of his frequent involvement in fights and constant absenteeism, one crew 2 member was suspended in year nine and had to repeat a year: "Repeating the year in any case sucks—it's boring to do the same stuff all over again" (Carlos, crew 2).

In fact, there was a combination of "push" factors that alienated my respondents from school or, at least, blemished their positive experiences at school. There is a crew of teacher-related "push" factors which refer to the way teachers treat students, teach-

ers' apathy, or their lack of attention to students' problems. The analysis of the interview data suggests that in both high schools that my interviewed attended, students were not treated with empathetic attention by teachers. The following comments are given below to exemplify perceptions of teachers' attitudes by my interviewees: "Teachers don't love the students. Some are just outright rude" (Nat, crew 2); "There were lots of tension...kids picking on each other and teachers don't care" (Mike, crew 2); "Classes are too large, teachers and administrators just don't care" (Homer, crew 1).

Another important factor is bullying. Bullying adds to the feeling of oppression by the system of formal authority at school which, in the eyes of my interviewees, appears to look "more like a prison" (Joe, crew 2) run by insensitive correctional officers (teachers and administrators) in complicity with oppressive inmates (bullies). Here are some quotes relevant to this issue:

I was always teased and picked on by other kids because I was quiet and shy...There was that mean guy [Name]. He would pick at me on the bus. It takes over an hour to get from school on this crowded filthy bus. He would even chase me home because he lived in my neighborhood. [Eddy, crew 1]

Too much bullying. One kid in PE class was a big bully. He hit my friend in the mouth so hard...made him bleed. [Joe, crew 2]

There was this guy [Name] who called me names. He had a big mouth...Yeah, that's what you call "verbal abuse." I was fed up with him. One day I grabbed

him by the collars of his shirt, picked him up, and slammed him up against the wall. I went to fight him after school...It was a good fight. [Carlos, crew 2]

There is yet another “push” factor that determined my interviewees’ disinterest in school—boredom. As Victor (crew 1) put it, “I was struggling to stay awake in school. It was so boring. It’s easy, but it’s boring. Teachers keep you in class until the end, I went to sleep in there...So by the end of the day I just wanted to get out and do what I want to do with my friends.” Eddy (crew 1) commented: “School wasn’t too bad, but I got bored easily...Science teacher was so boring. It feels like as if we’re stuck learning the same thing over and over again. And he’s just difficult to approach... I don’t like asking questions because I don’t want to look stupid.”

More generally, writers from crew 1 (second-generation immigrants) not only had more positive experiences in school than did crew 2 writers (the natives), but also tended to be more successful in terms of academic achievements. The differences in school-related experiences between crews 1 and 2 are likely to be accounted by the fact that the two crews went to two different schools. Both schools were large suburban high schools with ethnically homogeneous student population (more than 95% Hispanic). However, according to the U.S. News school ranking (The U.S. News 2013), the schools that crew 1 and 2 originated from differ with respect to student-to-teacher ratio. The high school which members of crew 1 went to was newer and had a lower student-to-teacher ratio than the one which crew 2 members attended. Moreover, it is possible that the school that crew 2 members attended had

a high teacher turnover (the author was not granted access to the statistical data to prove it, though). According to two of my respondents, crew 2 members, “teachers come and go” (Nat) in his school, and “every year I had a new teacher” (Joe). Prior research confirms that high teacher turnover is draining school districts of precious dollars that could be used to improve teaching quality and student learning (Ingersoll 2001). I also found differences in the perceptions of safety at school among crews 1 and 2. Crew 2 members explicitly told that their school had a reputation for fights breaking out, while crew 1 members were much likely to report fights at school, whether they were personally involved in them or not. Prior research shows that school safety depends on the school’s tolerance policy towards certain behaviors (Horner et al. 2009). Studies also suggest that student concerns about safety at school have a significant impact on their learning (Horner et al. 2009; Fan, Williams, and Corkin 2011).

This study’s findings are in line with prior research on delinquent adolescents (Lachmann 1988; Haynie 2001; Taylor 2012; Carroll et al. 2013), and, in the context of graffiti-writing experiences, with the results of a study conducted by Taylor and colleagues (2010). Subject boredom and teacher disinterest were identified by Taylor and colleagues (2010) as the most important school-related “push” factors that urged “graffers” to seek out the company of like-minded schoolmates. Taylor and colleagues also identified a growing attraction towards the company of non-conforming peers as one of the most powerful themes associated with engagement in risk-taking activities. This is not surprising since, in addition to encountering the formal authority system of the

school, youths in schools are exposed to the pressure of peer groups (e.g., Martinez 1997; Smith and Brain 2000; Othen-Price 2006; Kreager 2007). I further investigate this theme in the subsequent subsection.

Peers

According to prior research, the main mechanism through which young people start participating in graffiti is via exposure to the world of graffiti, that is, by observing graffiti and the process of painting graffiti (Ferrell 1995; Valle and Weiss 2010; Taylor 2012). This observation is generally consistent with social learning theory (Akers 1985), according to which the adoption of delinquent behavior occurs through the observation and later through imitation of peers’ delinquent behavior. The qualitative analysis of my interview data suggests, however, that this was not the primary route to graffiti subculture for my respondents. In the majority of cases, it was the involvement with the company of “graffer” schoolmates that determined my respondents’ graffiti-writing career. As one of my interviewees pointed out, “I got cool friends. They did it, so I did it...” (Nat, crew 2). The question that immediately arises is: What kind of social forces made my respondents seek out the company of “cool” friends? As it has been noted before, an increasing emotional distance from parents and other family members and dissatisfaction with school were significant motivators for seeking out the company of like-minded peers. Bored by the tedium of their daily school routines and misunderstood by their parents/guardians, my participants started a process of drifting away from their families and school while simultaneously in-

gratiating themselves into the company of friends they perceived to be “cool.”

A related question that can be posed here is how my participants found themselves in the company of “graffers” and not just “cool” friends. Before answering this crucial question, it should be noted that adolescents, usually, do not have much control in selecting their friends (Haynie 2001; Steinberg 2002). Indeed, as my analysis of the interview data indicates, my respondents joined a “graffer” crew via the help of a sponsor/instigator who, in the majority of cases, was the most experienced “graffer” in the crew. The fact that my interviewees found only limited opportunities to join a crew made the crew a particularly important source of influence on their behavior. Moreover, the analysis of the interview data consistently points to the pattern of active recruitment of apprentices by a more experienced “graffer.” All of my participants found their mentors from among schoolmates two to four years older than they. As such, the graffiti initiation process was a result of an individual friendship between a novice and a mentor.

The first meeting between a novice and a mentor usually occurred in unstructured contexts, such as “at lunch time” (Eddy, crew 1), “on the way from school” (Joe, crew 2), “in the hallway” (Mike, crew 2), or “in the cafeteria” (Homer, crew 1). Normally, graffiti topic was not brought up during the first meeting. Firstly, the instigator usually assessed a novice’s special interests, qualities as a potential “graffer,” and a degree of social openness. Then, on reaching a satisfactory conclusion, the instigator would start building closer ties with the nov-

ice. Only after the amicable and jovial rapport with a novice had been established, the instigator revealed his interest in graffiti by directly striking up a conversation about it. Immediately after that, the instigator would show examples of his graffiti work to a prospective “graffer.” The typical reaction to the instigator’s work was positive: “He made me jump out of my comfort zone...” (Victor, crew 1); “[Mentor’s work] stands out from the crowd and keeps me interested” (Fernando, crew 1); “He has his own unique style” (Lupe, crew 2).⁷

One of the reasons writers give for producing graffiti is to earn fame/popularity (“I just wanted my name to be known” [Mike, crew 2]), but to do this they require an audience. Thus, the novice first becomes an audience for his mentor and then he comes to believe that there will be an audience for his own work. Below are typical quotes that relate to the association/friendship forming experiences of the study’s participants:

We were hooked up through a mutual friend...Then [the instigator] showed me his work and introduced me to the crew. Everyone of them had a tag...I thought it was cool. The stuff they were doing looked awesome. I wanted to do the same or even better so I started doing it. [Homer, crew 1]

I was chilling with some guys. [Name] talked to me and asked if I’m interested [in graffiti]. So, he and

[Name] invited me to “tag” with them...[Name] does graffiti and rap. The stuff he does...Wow! You’ve got to respect his style. He speaks dirty, he dresses dirty, he thinks dirty. He IS dirty. Ha, ha! He sure doesn’t like girls, but they like him...I thought I want to be with these guys, do the stuff they do. The stuff they do sticks out. It’s fun, stupid, but fun. [Nat, crew 2]

The former quote is also suggestive of the fact that some adolescents form associations with “popular” peers because of the strive for recognition, both among their conforming and non-conforming peers.

The graffiti careers of my participants did not last long. According to Carlos (crew 2), “One can become a king in a year or so. There is no room to grow.” Fernando (crew 1) further explained: “I have other things on my mind...I’ve got a girlfriend and spend most of my time with her now.” My finding is consistent with what had been suggested by Lachmann (1988) more than 20 years ago—the average span of a typical writer is about 2 years and almost all “taggers” give up producing graffiti by their late teens. Possibly because of the short career duration of the writers I interviewed, I could not corroborate the argument advanced by Taylor (2012) that sustained involvement in graffiti-writing becomes addictive.

According to my participants, they had retired from their careers as “taggers” by the time of the interview. However, all of them started their careers as “toys” whose job was to serve an apprenticeship in the crew they were recruited into. Their job might included not only learning under more experienced writers, but also undertaking less desirable tasks, such as standing watch for the police. “All people

start as ‘toys’ and work their way up,” comments Carlos (crew 2). The analysis of the interview provides evidence of a status hierarchy in both crews, the hierarchy which is common to all adolescent peer groups (Lachmann 1988; Haynie 2001). The top position that gains the most respect is that of “king.” Although the exact formula of earning title of “king” is unknown, the title usually goes to the most experienced “tagger.” “King” is an honorary title. The “king” is not worried about maintaining his status within a crew, he “actually helps everybody grow” (Homer, crew 1). In order to work one’s way up the career ladder, that is, to gain status and recognition among other crew members, a less experienced “graffer” needs to prove himself to be worthy of his companions’ trust. The most common way to do it is to engage in more risky “tagging,” for example, “hitting” (covering) a moving train (“catching a rolling train” [Nat, crew 2]) or “hitting” a traffic signal on a busy street. “I loved getting rushes,” comments Carlos (crew 2). The risk writers take when they tag, and the speed and efficiency with which they create their pieces reward them with a recognition status and the highly-prized “graffer” reputation. In time, their peers’ recognition of their daring exploits provides less experienced “graffers” with a higher status within their crew. The importance of finding a position within their “crew” suggests that young writers are susceptible to peer influence during early years of their careers, including behavioral constraints that may pull them towards more risk-taking behaviors.

The desire for some adolescents to continue their careers in graffiti-writing is partly motivated by social support that their “graffer” friends provide. Indeed, a crew serves a number of important psychological

functions. Graffiti crews provide an opportunity to gain peer respect and a sense of security. A sense of belonging, non-conforming self-identity, and self-worth are some positive consequences associated with crew membership. “They look out for you,” recalled Eddy (crew 1); “We stick to each other at all times. We like going places, getting at girls” (Mike, crew 2). Homer (crew 1) explained further: “When I’m around my real friends, I can really come out and talk about real feelings...Because, on a crew, you can tell something that really means something to you...” An important theme in the interviews was the writers’ ability to trust and rely on their “graffer” friends to a higher degree that they were able to do with their families: “I trust guys [the crew] more than anybody. My family doesn’t understand me, but they do. They understand where I’m coming from...They are like brothers to me,” indicated Victor (crew 1). This finding is in line with prior research that peer groups are the most important sources of intimacy for today’s adolescents, and they have now taken on a number of the functions previously assumed by families (Steinberg 2002).

In sum, the analysis of the interview data is consistent with the current body of literature pertaining to the influence of peer groups on behavior of non-conforming/delinquent youths (Haynie 2001; McElhaney et al. 2008; Taylor et al. 2010). In line with prior research (Lachmann 1988), I found that more experienced “graffers” (mentors) actively recruit other non-conforming adolescents as new crew members. By establishing a relationship of trust with a mentor, who shows his own work and that of other “graffers” known to him, a novice becomes interested in the world of graffiti. After developing an interest in graffiti

⁷ It has to be mentioned here that none of the participants had taken drawing lessons in school or elsewhere. Yet, it is imperative to point out that, in the absence of any academic training in graphic arts, these adolescents found the way to manifest their frustrated creative talents in an extreme fashion of graffiti.

under the influence of mentors, new crew members build their friendship networks through gaining recognition status among other crew members. The friendship bonds that form in “graffer” crews not only meet their identity establishment needs, but also provide them with social support they seek.

Conclusion

I embed my discussion of the results of this study in two bodies of literature that seem particularly relevant. First, research that links delinquency and assimilation of Hispanic adolescents suggests that the more recent generations of Hispanic youths are less likely to engage in risky and non-conforming behaviors than their native counterparts, due to being more connected to their families and communities (Buriel et al. 1982). Second, a number of recent studies on adolescent graffiti writers note close behavioral similarity between adolescent writers and suggest that adolescents are attracted to graffiti as a way of proving their bravery and contempt for authority (Othen-Price 2006; Taylor 2012). Within this line of research, studies stemming from reputation enhancing goals theory contend that graffiti-writing provides an ideal means for adolescents to establish a non-conforming status and image among the peer group (Taylor et al. 2010; Carroll et al. 2013). Drawing from these two literatures, I examined the pathways to the subculture of graffiti undertaken by two crews (groups) of Hispanic adolescent (ex-)writers in Hidalgo County, TX. The crews differed with respect to immigrant generational status: parents of adolescents from crew 1 were all immigrants from Mexico and Central America, while crew 2 consisted of native-born children of native-born parents. In essence, the difference between crew 1 and

crew 2 is operationalized as the difference between second- and third-generations of immigrant youths.

The qualitative analysis did not reveal differences in the narratives of adolescents from crew 1 and from crew 2 concerning their family life. Put differently, my findings could not support the long-standing argument that, owing to the protective character of ethnic cultural norms infused in them by their families, the more recent generation of Hispanic adolescents (which is identified as crew 1) is less likely to exhibit antisocial behaviors than the higher generation (identified as crew 2) (e.g., Buriel et al. 1982; Vega et al. 1993). In fact, there were more commonalities than differences in the way adolescents perceived to be treated by other family members. With a few exceptions, all my interviewees were raised either by single mothers or by other family members. In addition to the fact that young men often did not have a suitable adult male role model in the family, they received very little, if any, guidance and social support from other family members. Moreover, family life of many of my interviewees was permeated by conflict. There was also a sense of lack of cohesion in the families of adolescents I interviewed. It is important to note that, according to prior research, adolescents who see their families as more cohesive may feel less distressed in response to difficulties in school and elsewhere (Griffin et al. 2000; Dornbusch et al. 2001; McQueen et al. 2003). Additionally, it has long been suggested that adolescents tightly bonded to family are less likely to engage in delinquent acts (Dornbusch et al. 2001; Gonzales et al. 2006).

Further, there were perceived differences between crew 1 and crew 2 members in the way they experi-

enced school life. Although the themes of isolation, boredom, and despise of the adults controlling their school lives (teachers and administrators) were present in all respondents' narratives, writers that joined crew 1 tended to be less acrimonious about their school life than their “graffer” counterparts from crew 2. Generally, the theme of bullying and student fights was prominent in the narratives of crew 2 members rather than in the accounts produced by “graffers” of crew 1. Literature suggests that the absence of family protective effects produces sensitivity to interpersonal conflicts (Griffin et al. 2000; Demuth and Brown 2004). Ostensibly, this argument is not sufficient to explain the differences between crews 1 and 2 in their perceptions of school atmosphere because of the relative homogeneity of family conditions for all participants. The most likely explanation of the varying perceptions of hostile atmosphere at school relates to school “quality.” Crew 1 consisted of adolescents who attended the same high school in McAllen-Edinburg-Mission MSA. Adolescent graffers—crew 2 members—were also students of one high school in the same MSA, but in a different school district. The two high schools in which two “graffer” crews were based differed with respect to location, student-to-teacher ratio, and, possibly, teacher turnover. It is also possible (but there is no direct evidence in the interview data) that the school that crew 1 attended had a less tolerant policy towards certain behaviors, such as bullying, than the school that housed crew 2.

More similarities than differences have been noted in the friendship formation patterns between crews 1 and 2. Simple but true that spatial proximity affects the opportunity for prospective and active “graffers”

to become acquainted. The fact that the crews were formed in schools lends support to the argument that writers tend to meet potential friends within their school. I also noted the pattern of active recruitment of novices by more experienced “graffers.” The common pattern was that an instigator (prospective mentor) befriends novices younger than himself as an audience for his work. The mentor gains satisfaction and respect with novices who, in the process of observing the mentor's work, learn that there might be an audience for their own graffiti. Thus, involvement in graffiti is a prime example of the acquisition of social visibility through the presence of a regular audience that provides feedback, a finding that scholars have consistently observed in prior research (e.g., Emler et al. 1987; Othen-Price 2006; Taylor 2012; Carroll et al. 2013). Once adolescents make their choice to enter the world of graffiti, they transit a pathway towards establishing a reputation among their “graffer” friends. I found a certain behavioral similarity among graffiti writers, which suggests that “graffer” friends mutually influence one another through the reinforcement of their subculture values. In order to gain a higher status among peers, writers indulge in a range of risk-taking behaviors, such as writing graffiti on a moving train or on a traffic signal situated on a busy intersection. The highly visible and public nature of these behaviors communicates their intention of achieving status among other writers, as well as popularity among more conforming peers. This finding is generally in line with reputation enhancing goals theory (Carroll et al. 2009; Carroll et al. 2013). Finally, I found that other crew members are the most important sources of intimacy for adolescent writers and they have taken on a number of the functions not provided by their families (e.g., social support, etc.).

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