THE LOGIC OF DEFINITION IN CRIMINOLOGY: PURPOSES AND METHODS FOR DEFINING "GANGS"

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This article is aimed at clarifying some of the problems in gang definition by examination of the logic of definition. Definitions are considered in terms of various purposes as well as lexical and stipulative definitional types. Methods of stipulative definition that have been tangled together in gang research and theory are identified as analytic definition and synthetic definition, with the latter including correlational, causal, and definition by description. The article examines how various researchers and theorists have fallen into various errors of logic in use of these methods and how gang research and theory might make more consistent progress through clarification of the definitional issues.

Problems of definition in criminology are more serious than many admit, for as Maxson and Klein (1990:71) quote an anonymous attorney, "Let me make the definitions and I'll win any argument." This article examines the term *gang*, which is the subject of the quotation, as a case in point. When surveyed in the early 1980s, 50% of the 44 largest cities in the United States reported gang problems (Needle and Stapleton, 1983). The most recent national survey shows that by 1992 this figure had grown to 91 percent, and approximately the same percentage of the next 35 largest cities also now reported such problems (Curry et al., 1994). Yet as far back as the middle 1970s, one of the most experienced gang researchers stressed that, "At no time has there been anything close to consensus on what a gang might be—by scholars, by criminal justice workers, by the general public" (Miller, 1975:115). Later researchers added that definitions "have varied over time according to the perception and interests of the definer, academic fashions, and the changing social reality of the gang" (Spergel et al., 1989:13).

The confusion is so great that some advocate abandoning the term, maintaining that it can never be standardized because it is not a term used by youth themselves to reflect the actual empirical reality of their involvements but rather a relatively meaningless label thrown about by the adult community (Conly, 1993). Others insist that everyone should be allowed

to define it according to personal preferences to avoid closing off exploration of a rich variety of alternative possibilities (Horowitz, 1990). Finally, some maintain that everyone already understands the meaning intuitively (National Institute of Justice, 1992).

This last position may amount to saying, "I can't define 'gang,' but I know one if I see one." Logically, it is an appeal to "ostensive definition," the method by which a phenomenon is defined by physical introduction, such as by pointing at it (Harney, 1984). It poses the same problem faced by the courts with respect to terms such as *obscenity* or *pornography*, the problem of passage from a *clear* to a *distinct* idea. Although one has a clear or vivid idea of a thing when one can recognize examples of it immediately, the idea is not yet distinct until one can enumerate one-by-one the features that distinguish the thing from others. Even when the courts are able to arrive at a reasonably clear idea of pornography in the sense that they can recognize examples, they have not been successful in developing a distinct definition. Much the same is true of the term gang, which has led some gang researchers to the nominalistic position suggesting that there can never be a satisfactory definition (Horowitz, 1990).

Despite the insistence of the nominalists, however, words are not merely circular terms defined by other words in an endless cycle. Most terms are linked to empirical reality by having been defined ostensively in the first place (Makau, 1990). Part of the difference between a scientific and a literary approach to criminology lies in the persistent effort to clarify key terms from time to time by the ostensive method, pointing directly to empirical reality, so that definitions do not stray too far from their empirical referents. Still, verbal definitions are needed precisely because the researcher or theorist cannot take everyone to the phenomenon in question. And even if that were possible, when one pointed at a complex phenomenon and called it a gang, (1) meaning would have to depend entirely on visible characteristics and (2) it might not be clear which of all the visible characteristics were considered salient (Harney, 1984). As many logicians have shown (Baker and Hacker, 1984), those pointing at some phenomenon ostensively are usually drawing on a body of implicit knowledge extrinsic to it, including heuristic rules for *what* to see as well as *how* to see it, even if they are unable to articulate the implicit rules that guided observation and interpretation.

Definitions are necessary (Robinson, 1950), some definitions are better than others (Ayer, 1971), and criteria exist by which their relative value can be assessed (Bentley and Dewey, 1947; Quine, 1970). Some definitions can be considered superior because they prove more useful for certain purposes. This may involve, for example, something as simple as the level of generality. Destro (1993:280) seems to have had this in mind

when commenting on gang definitions, noting that, "in legal parlance, sociological definitions tend to be both overinclusive ('overbroad') and underinclusive ('discriminatory'), and if they are adopted for criminal law purposes, they are in danger of being held unconstitutional because they are not specific enough." He could have added that legal definitions of *gang* tend to be both overly narrow and overly broad for sociological purposes because they neglect the social dimensions that make the phenomenon sociologically meaningful.

Logically, approaches to the problem of definition may be classified in terms of purposes, types, and methods, which makes possible a multitude of definitional styles. Theorists may seek a definition that will provide a term logically integrated into a larger postulatory framework, while researchers seek sufficient standardization to guide them toward the same phenomena and allow for comparison of findings. Administrators may care less about the theoretical power or empirical applicability of a definition than the fact that it is simple enough to impose bureaucratic standardization for purposes of recordkeeping, and police may be interested primarily in an expedient definition allowing them to hold the collectivity responsible for criminal acts of individual members or vice versa (Moore, 1993). To complicate matters further, even those with the same purpose may be working with either a lexical or stipulative type of definition, depending upon whether they wish to report customary meanings or establish a more specific definition by fiat. Much of the confusion stems from different definitions of *definition* and logical errors in their comparison.

METHODS OF LEXICAL DEFINITION

Criminology texts (e.g., Bynum and Thompson, 1992; Seigel and Senna, 1994) and courts (Destro, 1993) sometimes begin their search for a gang definition with the dictionary. Unfortunately, however, dictionary definitions are less a summary of customary speech than what one logician has called "the history of use by a preferred class" (Robinson, 1950:36). In dictionary definitions, the term *gang* tends to designate collectivities that are (1) marginal, (2) loosely organized, and (3) without a clear, social purpose. Like other forms of deviance, gangs are defined not in their own terms but in terms of what they are not. Because definitions should never be expressed in the negative (Stebbing, 1933), the result is that dictionary definitions of *gang*, which tend to be veiled expressions of bourgeois disapproval, may actually impede efforts to arrive at a standardized definition intrinsic to the phenomenon in question.

Faced with the problem of studying gang participation without a definition, some have asked respondents whether they belonged to a collectivity

that *they* defined as a gang. As Fagan (1989:634) has stressed, "This strategy was chosen specifically to avoid the problems in definitions that have confounded gang research." Yet Spergel and Curry (1988, 1990) found that participation indicators scaled differently for Hispanics and African-Americans, meaning that lexical gang definitions seem to vary even among those who define themselves as gang members. In an effort to put together a lexical definition that could be used by law enforcement agencies, Miller (1975) asked a national survey of youth service agency workers, police officers, community outreach workers, judges, criminal justice planners, probation officers, prosecutors, public defenders, educators, city council members, state legislators, ex-convicts, and past and present members of gangs for their definition of the term. Although the result was a list of 1,400 different characteristics, 85% agreed on 6 items defining a youth gang as

> a self-formed association of peers, bound together by mutual interests, with identifiable leadership, well-developed lines of authority, and other organizational features, who act in concert to achieve a specific purpose or purposes which generally include the conduct of illegal activity and control over a particular territory, facility, or type of enterprise (Miller, 1975:121).

Klein and Maxson (1989:205) argue that this is a "discouraging" approach, insisting that definitions based on a vote have no special validity. In terms of the logic of definitions, they are correct and incorrect, depending on the type of definition. Voting is an appropriate approach for determining the *lexical* definition held by a particular segment of the population. Such definitions may seem unsatisfactory because they are inconsistent and vary from one segment of society to another, but the fact is that the more complex and changing the society, the more varied and shifting will be their lexical definitions. At the same time, voting is certainly a poor method for establishing a *stipulative* definition, especially when the subject is highly emotional and different segments of society seem to be approaching the question from different perspectives with different purposes.

METHODS OF STIPULATIVE DEFINITION

Methods of stipulative definition include the implicative method, the denotative method, definition by analysis, and definition by synthesis. The implicative method is also called the contextual method because it implies a definition through use of the word in a context that suggests its meaning (Baker and Hacker, 1984). Sometimes called the exemplification method, the denotative method cites specific examples denoted by the term. Definition by analysis is the method through which a phenomenon is defined

by breaking it into component parts, either by listing properties or subtypes (Ayer, 1971). The method of definition by synthesis is also called the relational method because it proceeds by showing how something relates to other things already known (Robinson, 1950).

Often what is taken for an analytic definition is really one form of synthetic definition. This conflation leads to several common errors of logic, some of which have affected criminological research and theory. Correlational definition, for example, which is one substrategy of the synthetic method, defines a term by locating it in terms of its correlates (Hall, 1943:162–165), as when an "alligator" is defined as "a large reptile *associated with tropical rivers and marshes of the U.S. and China.*" Unfortunately, it is easy to confuse correlates with properties, thus mistaking what is really a synthetic definition for an analytic definition delineating intrinsic properties. Another form of the synthetic method is causal or genetic definition, such as when a "circle" is defined geometrically as "that figure produced by drawing a line in a plane with one end fixed" (Robinson, 1950:133). Still another is definition by description (Lewis, 1929:231), such as when "gold" is defined as "the most precious metal," giving not a chemical analysis but a socioeconomic description that locates the substance by its socioeconomic meaning. Much confusion has resulted from tangling these methods.

THE IMPLICATIVE METHOD

Such gang researchers as Moore (1978), Vigil (1988), Hagedorn and Macon (1989), and Horowitz (1990) tend to rely upon implicative definition. In some ways the implicative method can provide a richer sense of the meaning of a particular term, because actual use of a term illustrates dimensions of meaning in a way that a succinct definition may never match (Stebbing, 1933). As a method capable of portraying the phenomenon as a dynamic process in a way that cannot be captured by a list of defining characteristics, it is either the equivalent of the "process definition" advocated but not entirely clarified by such gang researchers as Hagedorn and Macon (1989) or an especially useful strategy for developing such definitions. But the richness of implicative definition is bought at the price of precision, and the method tends to be unsatisfactory for purposes of standardizing definitions. Because implications convey different meanings to different people, latent connotations tend to escape theoretical debate and empirical research (Ayer, 1971).

To the extent that succinct definitions are provided, they tend to take their meaning from the general context. Thus, one of Hagedorn and Macon's (1989:5) shorter definitions describes the gang as a

> friendship group of adolescents who share common interests, with a

> more or less clearly defined territory, in which most of the members live. They are committed to defending one another, the territory, and the gang name in the status-setting fights that occur in school and on the street.

The meanings of such subsidiary terms as "friendship" are implied within the book-length context.

The implicative method of definition directs theory toward an emphasis on the way in which the gang fits as a natural part of the everyday life of a community. It encourages an *emic* methodology that tries to see through the eyes of the gang rather than an *etic* methodology that examines the gang through the lens provided by official data (Hagedorn and Macon, 1989). Theorists and researchers defining the gang through the implicative method are in greater danger of "going native" because anything begins to seem more acceptable when one defines it through the worldview of its adherents. By implying a definition through continued usage of the term within a conceptual framework rooted in a certain sociopolitical perspective, it also implies acceptance of this perspective. Thus, Hagedorn and Macon (1989) not only charges those using other methods with a "courthouse criminology" that sides with the authorities but also insists that only a researcher who already shares the worldview of the gang neighborhood is equipped to understand either it or the gang as defined within its context. In the same way, the implicative method leads Moore (1977) to advocate a "collaborative model" that relies on current or former gang members as informants and requires that the research design and all research instruments be developed in collaboration with them.

The contextuality through which implicative definition is constructed amounts to an elaborate set of tautologies, which are then reinforced by rules that define only those accepting them as qualified to study gangs. Such definitions serve to support the preexisting assumptions of those who share the perspective but fail to satisfy those who do not share it. By emphasizing local ambiance with empathic stress on such aspects as ethnic life, implicative definitions provide more literary texture than theoretical generalization, something that is both strength and weakness.

THE DENOTATIVE METHOD

Knox's (1991) gang definition counters the implicative method with the denotative method, multiplying detailed example after detailed example, complete with constitutions and by-laws, to show what he means by a gang. Like the ostensive method, the denotative method seems at first glance to nail down meaning in a way that eliminates any ambiguity. Logically, however, the method tends to be unsatisfactory as a strategy for

defining gangs, in part because precise denotation of a term requires indication of all the particular examples to which it is applied or at least all of the classes to which it is applied (Ayer, 1971), and in part because the method works poorly for defining terms that are not primarily or exclusively denotative but highly connotative as well (Cooper, 1986).

The denotation/exemplification method is most effective for standardizing the definitions of terms carrying only a few denotations, such as the term *continent*, for which there are only seven examples, but there are thousands of different examples of gangs, with new ones appearing almost every day. Actually, presentation of examples in minute detail tends to favor the particular over the general, and no matter how many examples are presented, there may always be others that are quite different. Further, "The term 'gang' is notoriously imprecise [in denotation], but there is no question that it has a generally pejorative connotation" (Destro, 1993:178). Indeed, in many ways *gang* seems to be not an indicative term (e.g., a denotative noun) at all but an expressive term (e.g., a connotative expletive) uttered either when certain emotions are evoked or in order to evoke such emotions in others.

Part of the problem in defining many terms is that the emotional dimension of meaning may be stronger than the indicative dimension. That is why the difficulty in developing a denotative definition of *gang* is so similar to that faced in developing denotative definitions of terms such as obscenity or pornography, which also seem to be primarily connotative (expressive) rather than denotative (indicative). *Art* can be distinguished from *pornography* in no objective sense but only by the emotional response it evokes. Unfortunately for denotative definition, this means that what serves as art for one person may serve as pornography for another. To the extent that the difference between a "friendship group" (Hagedorn and Macon, 1989) and a pathological "near-group" (Yablonsky, 1959) lies in the eye of the beholder, gang definition will continue to depend on the characteristics of the definer rather than the defined.

DEFINITION BY ANALYSIS

Many have approached the problem of gang definition through the analytic method, and the sorts of properties they have elected to focus upon have led them in certain directions. Both research and theory have been heavily influenced by the resulting definitions. Used to good effect by such gang researchers as Knox (1991) and Jankowski (1991), the comparison-and-contrast substrategy of analytic definition is especially useful for moving from clear to distinct ideas (Ayer, 1971). By providing a series of examples with overlapping but differing properties, such as in sharpening gang definitions through comparison-and-contrast with phenomena such

as the crew or posse, this substrategy solves some of the problems of the denotative method, especially through its capacity to clarify the meaning of many different but related terms simultaneously.

When definition by analysis of properties is used most precisely, it yields a listing of properties each of which is itself not only defined specifically but also weighted according to an analytic formula. The fact that criminal law requires specific charges demands that police-based definitions proceed by analysis of properties, and the general rule that individuals are not to be punished for what they are (e.g., gang members) but for what they do (e.g., gang activities) tends to require that such definitions focus on illegal behavior. Thus, it is not surprising that when Miller (1975) attempted to develop a standardized definition by constructing both a list of key properties and an ordinal weighting from lexical definitions supplied by multiple informants in five "gang-problem cities," the result included in rank order (1) violent or criminal behavior as a major activity, (2) group organization with functional role division and chain-of-command, (3) identifiable leadership, (4) continuing and recurrent interaction of members, and (5) identification with and/or claims of control over identifiable community territory.

Many other gang researchers also stress illegal behavior in their definitions. Gardner (1993:5), for example, emphasized that "the key element [analytic property] that distinguishes a gang from other organizations of young people is delinquency; its members regularly participate in activities that violate the law." Such definitions have had a profound impact on gang research, theory, and policy, with the result that "the sociological literature on gangs offers a number of theories, but a close look at each of these indicates that they are really theories about delinquency and not theories about gangs" (Jankowski, 1991:21). The apparently irrational tendency to move from almost total denial when gangs first appear to overreaction when they can no longer be ignored (Huff, 1990) is to some extent a logical consequence of the fact that by this definition they are not gangs until lawbreaking has become their primary characteristic, by which time drastic measures seem necessary.

Definitions including illegal activity as an intrinsic defining property, especially those in which it is defined as the dominating property, also tend to minimize any theoretical distinctions among gangs except for degree of delinquency. In fact, because illegal activity tends to be the only normative property included, properties such as friendship and common interests, which are usually considered positive qualities, are excluded from gang definitions. The results include (1) tacit acceptance of the law enforcement perspective (Morash, 1983) and (2) tautological inclusion by definition of the very delinquency that researchers and theorists may be trying to explain (Short, 1990).

The function of a definition is to explain the meaning of a term, and analytic definitions, by tearing it out of context, may actually deprive it of much of its meaning. If the only salient property of a "gang member," for example, is his or her membership in a gang, one result may be that any illegal activity involving such a person is defined as "gang related." This is the case in Los Angeles, where the definition produces twice as much "gang-related" violence as would be produced by the Chicago definition, which acknowledges that gang members may have motives unrelated to their gang membership (Maxson and Klein, 1990).

Further, analytic definitions, by assigning the same properties to all gangs, deflect theoretical and research interests away from gang variations. Some (e.g., Cloward and Ohlin, 1960; Jankowski, 1991; Knox, 1991; Taylor, 1990; Thrasher, 1927) have countered this by defining the gang entirely or partly in terms of constituent subtypes rather than constituent properties. By emphasizing the variety of different forms subsumed under the concept *gang*, this definitional substrategy tends to yield a looser definition than that obtained by analysis of properties, and the covering term *gang* becomes more of a linguistic convenience. One result is that theory often moves more in the direction of explaining how different subtypes develop than in the direction of generalizing about gang development, while research tends to examine the way in which different subtypes function rather than the way in which the gang functions *sui generis*.

SYNTHETIC DEFINITION

While analytic definition defines by reduction to constituents, the synthetic method defines by locating a phenomenon in a larger and presumably better-understood context. Thus, the earliest gang definition in criminology (Puffer, 1912:7) defined the gang as "for the boy one of the three primary social groups . . . [which include] the family, the neighborhood, and the play group; but for the normal boy the play group is the gang," further defining all three primary groups as "restrictive human groupings, formed like flock and pack and hive." Successful synthetic definitions open fruitful new avenues for theory and research, while misplaced synthetic definitions direct both into blind alleys. Puffer's definition incorporated the assumption that primary groups in general and the gang in particular were outmoded evolutionary remnants and that ganging was a stage through which boys recapitulated the evolution of their species, emerging from that primitive state as they matured.

Although they are much less laden with biological assumptions, most gang definitions agree in treating the gang as one type of group and are therefore in part synthetic definitions. Short (1990:239), for example, defines it as "a group whose members meet together with some regularity over time, on the basis of group-defined criteria of membership and

group-determined organizational structure." This method of definition has had a profound effect upon research and theory from the days of Puffer (1912) through the work of Short and Strodbeck (1965) to Goldstein's (1991) recent work approaching gangs through the group dynamics tradition. Yet, synthetic definitions treating the gang as a group are also somewhat tautological, assuming what ought to be researched and ignoring the data suggesting that gang organization ranges across a considerable continuum.

Yablonsky's (1959) synthetic definition located the gang as a "near-group" midway between the stable, cohesive, and relatively permanent group with fixed membership and the spontaneous, chaotic, temporary mob with shifting membership. Horowitz's (1983) differentiation of "gangs," "groups" and "pseudogroups" provides a more recent example of an effort to define the gang by comparison-and-contrast to organizational types that are similar in some ways but different in other respects. Most gang researchers tend to characterize them as "loosely organized" (Spergel, 1989:2) or "characteristically unstable as a form of association and organization" (Short, 1974:16). Klein and Maxson (1989:100) capture some of this in their description of the gang as a "shifting, elusive target, permeable and elastic, not a cohesive force but a spongelike resilience," and the data suggest that gangs tend to slide back-and-forth along an organizational continuum. At some point, a "pre-gang" (Knox, 1989) becomes a gang, but it may slide back to "pre-gang," perhaps even dissolving, or it may become increasingly stable, cohesive, and permanent, crossing the definitional boundary from "gang" to "organized crime," as Taylor (1990) has characterized the El Rukns in Chicago.

Process definitions capture some of these dynamics, but they remain vague, while analytic typologies tend to reify the types and deflect attention from the organizational fluidity of gangs. Unfortunately, efforts at synthetic typologies may also fail because of this same fluidity. When Miller (1980), frustrated with earlier efforts to construct a standardized definition through the analytic method he had been following implicitly to that point, turned toward a synthetic method that located three types of "gangs" within a larger typology of 20 different "law-violating youth groups," the definition proved unworkable for police departments surveyed, most of which could not distinguish the gang subtypes from the other 17 subtypes (Needle and Stapleton, 1983).

That part of Thrasher's (1927:46) influential definition that terms the gang an "interstitial group" reflects the synthetic method both by defining the gang as a group and by locating it in a transitional phase between childhood and adulthood and a transitional zone between central business district and more stable residential areas. His definition was motivated in part by an urge to combat theorists such as Puffer (1912), but it too led in

certain directions, in this case toward concentration on the social disorganization that was presumed to characterize interstitial areas and provide a natural breeding ground for both gangs and delinquency. Some later theorists such as Cohen (1955), Bloch and Niederhoffer (1958), and Miller (1958), along with researchers such as Yablonsky (1959), Spergel (1964), and Miller (1975), tended to treat the relationship as one in which the milieu produced the gang, which was characterized as having delinquent properties. Others tended to see the milieu as less disorganized and to focus upon the way in which the gang fit into the community structure (Suttles, 1968; Whyte, 1943), treating gang involvement in illegal activity as another part of the scene but not as the major focus of the gang. Still others (Hagedorn and Macon, 1989; Horowitz, 1983; Moore, 1978; Sullivan, 1989; Vigil, 1988) have minimized causal relationships between gangs and illegality, explaining any association as the consequence of a common source—long-term poverty. Vigil's (1988) explanation of barrio gangs in terms of "multiple marginality" manifesting itself in "choloization" (a term originally meaning a racial or cultural marginal between Indian and colonial Spanish ways of life but broadened to cover many aspects of sociocultural interstitiality), shows the impact of Thrasher's (1927) synthetic definition on gang theory even after 60 years.

Correlational Synthetic Definitions

Much of the confusion over gang definition seems to be the result of conflating correlates with intrinsic, analytic properties. This is most obvious in definitions treating illegal activity as an intrinsic property of the gang, because they tend to produce theories based on the assumption that the forces leading to gang formation—whether the instinctive need to run in a pack (Puffer, 1912), status frustration (Cohen, 1955), or the lack of structured rites of passage (Bloch and Niederhoffer, 1958)—are the same as those leading to delinquency. Other correlates that have been confused with properties include adolescent male membership, lower socioeconomic status, urban areas, territoriality, violence, and drug dealing.

Gang definitions (Huff, 1990; Klein, 1971; Miller, 1975) frequently use the terms *adolescent* or *youth*; Puffer (1912) specified the early teens; Thrasher (1927) added somewhat older members; and Miller (1975), Vigil (1988), and Goldstein (1991) specified age ranges of 10–22, 13–25, and 9–30, respectively. Curry et al. (1994) report that the modal age of gang members has increased considerably, from about 16 to over 19, with some cities estimating that 80 percent of those involved in gangs are adults over age 18. If "adolescence" is used as it once was to refer to the teen years from 13 to 19, it is clearly not to be regarded as an intrinsic property of the gang. Only if the term is used loosely to refer to that interstitial age period between childhood and maturity, and is regarded as beginning earlier and

ending later than was once the case, is it still possible to defend a position defining adolescence as an analytic property of the gang.

Puffer (1912), who defined early adolescent, male membership as an intrinsic property of the gang, could only conclude that boys were manifesting a primordial instinct that disappeared in later adolescence. Noting the increasing numbers of young adult "adolescents," and impressed with the trend toward drug dealing and violence, Goldstein (1991), who seems to see adolescence as more of a correlate than a defining property, is led to treat age as a dependent variable with respect to the former and an independent variable with respect to the latter. He hypothesizes that gangs now retain older members primarily because of a shift to drug-dealing activity, with the increasing lethal violence then resulting from the tendency of these older "youth" to use more sophisticated weapons. Gang researchers such as Hagedorn and Macon (1989) do not define violence or drug dealing as either intrinsic properties or significant correlates, define age as more of a correlate than a property, and trace the shift toward older membership to economic changes that have eliminated jobs for the young adults who would once have aged-out of the gang.

Troublesome collectivities of youth have always been much more likely to be defined as gangs if they were of lower socioeconomic status and happen to be located in large cities (Bursik and Grasmick, 1992; Huff, 1990; Vigil, 1988). Yet similar activity has existed for many years among middle-class youth and in rural areas, suburbs, and small towns (Muehlbauer and Dodder, 1983; Salisbury, 1958; Vigil, 1988). Since Puffer (1912) and Thrasher (1927), definitions have focused on males manifesting territoriality, but considerable evidence shows that females are now frequently involved in these activities and that territoriality is less important and differently defined (Campbell, 1984; Vigil, 1988).

On the other hand, some (Curry et al., 1994; Klein and Maxson, 1989) have cited evidence indicating that Yablonsky's (1959) stress on violence may be more appropriate to definitions today than when it was first proposed in the 1950s. Others (Taylor, 1990) have insisted that the same is true of drug dealing, which was not a part of early definitions at all. Logic suggests that socioeconomic status, urban setting, adolescent male membership, territoriality, violence, and drug dealing should not be included as properties defining a gang, although definitions might cite these characteristics as correlates. When correlates are mistaken for properties, gang definitions tend to include many incorrect assumptions. Definitions treating both violence and illegal activity as intrinsic properties of the gang, for example, led logically to the assumption that the association between an increase in cocaine dealing and growing violence in Los Angeles could be traced to gangs, assuming that when gangs extended their illegal activity into the cocaine trade, they brought their violence with them. The fact

that the only research into the question proved this assumption wrong (Klein et al., 1988) emphasizes once again the need for greater attention to the logic of definition.

Causal Synthetic Definitions

Causal definition was once more common in gang research than it is today. Unfortunately, however, the residual effects have lingered, and the problem here is even more serious than with correlational definition. Not only does causal definition run the risk of confusing correlations with properties, but it falls further into tautology by treating as logically genetic, a priori characteristics what are really hypotheses.

Puffer's (1912:7) definition of the gang as "one of the three primary social groups . . . formed like pack and flock and hive" went on to add, "*in response to deep-seated but unconscious needs*" (emphasis added), thus initiating the tradition of causal definitions. Thrasher (1927) devoted considerable effort to countering these Darwinian assumptions, but that part of his classic definition terming the gang a group that is "first formed spontaneously, and then integrated through conflict" (p. 46) represents another causal definition. Thirty years later, Miller's (1958) first gang definition incorporated a teleological hypothesis, defining the gang as "a stable and solitary primary group *preparing the young male for an adult role in lower-class society*" (emphasis added). Although correlational definitions are acceptable and can be useful if clarified, causal definitions should be confined to axiomatic systems such as geometry, where tautology is proof of consistency rather than a source of error, and should be strictly avoided in any field wishing to develop through empirical research (Robinson, 1950).

Synthetic Definitions by Description

Definitions by description are pragmatic definitions that seek not intrinsic properties, correlates, or causes but a means of defining in terms of consequences (Bentley and Dewey, 1947). Working in this tradition, labeling theory stressed that "deviance" is not defined by any inherent properties of the phenomenon but by social reactions to it. The tradition maintains that the "definition of the situation" is more important than its intrinsic properties because, "if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas and Thomas, 1928:572).

Major parts of Sarnecki's (1985:11) definition of the gang as a "group of individuals *who are linked together because the police suspected them of committing crimes together*" (emphasis added) represent synthetic definition by description, as do other definitions (Cartwright, 1975:4) which indicate that the gang is an "interstitial and integrated group of persons who meet face-to-face regularly *and whose existence and activities as a group*

are considered an actual or potential threat to the prevailing social order" (emphasis added). Each begins by defining the gang as a group but focuses its definition on the negative reactions.

The same is true of those parts of Klein's (1971:1428) influential definition of the gang as "any denotable adolescent group of youngsters who (a) are *generally perceived as a distinct aggregation* by others in their neighborhood, (b) *recognize themselves* as a denotable group (almost invariably with a group name), and (c) have been involved in a sufficient number of delinquent incidents to call forth a *consistent negative response from neighborhood residents and/or law enforcement agencies*" (emphasis added). Klein (1971:1428) notes that, "this is not meant as a definitive denotation of the label, gang, [but] is merely designed to say that a group is a gang when it is reacted to as a distinctly anti-social group of genuine concern and accepts itself as a group apart." Despite all disclaimers, however, there has been a persistent tendency to take such synthetic definition for analysis of intrinsic properties. That part of Klein's (1971:1428) definition referring to "a sufficient number of delinquent incidents" seems to be defining a property of the gang, partly because "delinquent incidents" are being taken for granted as a property, and partly because it is easy to overlook the fact that the term "sufficient" is being defined by social reactions. To say that the delinquent incidents were sufficient to call forth consistent negative reactions from either the neighborhood or the police is to imply that they were serious and prevalent.

That part of Klein's (1971:1428) disclaimer that points out that his definition is "not meant as a definitive denotation" has been largely ignored, and the definition has been treated as if substantial delinquent activity were in fact an intrinsic property of the gang. Because it tends to shift the emphasis from the way in which the gang fits into its milieu toward a focus on negative characteristics arousing community opposition, it deflects attention from the data showing that communities are usually ambivalent about their gangs, partly because the members are their children, partly because either they or their friends may have once been gang members themselves, and partly because the gangs do offer recreation, protection, and other services. The tendency to mistake synthetic definition by description for analysis of properties is the real source of Hagedorn and Macon's (1989) complaint that definitions such as Klein's (1971:1428) somehow tend to make the basic question one having to do with why its members are delinquent rather than whether they are delinquent. Such problems make it clear that concern for the logic of definition is not a matter of hairsplitting among those interested in the philosophy of science but an issue vital to progress in gang research, theory, and public policy.

CONCLUSION

Even when older definitions have proved acceptable, new definitions often become necessary, either because of changes in the phenomenon itself or changes in the purposes for which definition is required. As Bridgeman (1928) pointed out in his well-known discussion of "operational definitions," any research definition is likely to require periodic respecification, partly because it will tend to include some false implications that arose as a consequence of the serendipitous process that produced it. Definitions tend to be based on those aspects of the phenomena in question that were most visible and most salient at the time. As the relative visibility of various phenomenal features changes with research progress, and the salience of these various features shifts with new perspectives and purposes, redefinition often becomes necessary.

Each of the methods of definition examined above has its strengths and weaknesses. The analytic method is best for defining intrinsic features, and the synthetic method is best for locating within a framework of cumulative knowledge. The implicative method adds breadth and depth, while the denotative method sharpens meaning by specific examples. Avoiding the causal method entirely, the best definitions tend to combine the remaining methods according to the most powerful heuristic rules available.

Thrasher's (1927:46) definition undoubtedly remains so influential in part because he complemented his synthetic method with the analytic method, terming the gang not only an "interstitial group" but specifying that it was characterized by properties such as "meeting face-to-face, milling, moving through space as a unit, conflict, and planning," then subsuming these properties under the framework of "collective behavior" and adding the further analytic properties of "tradition, unreflective internal structure, espirit de corps, solidarity, morale, group awareness, and attachment to a local territory." Klein's (1971:1428) widely used definition combines reference to the denotative and synthetic method in his definition of the gang as "any denotative group of youngsters" while stressing synthetic definition by description, and Miller (1975, 1980) was driven to complement his earlier analytic method (Miller, 1975) with the synthetic method (Miller, 1980). Unfortunately, however, few if any gang researchers and theorists have been sufficiently conscious of their own definitional strategies, with the result that their definitions have carried too many latent connotations, treated correlates or consequences as properties or causes, or contributed to similar errors of logic. It is crucial that definitions combining different methods make it clear whether they are advancing lexical or stipulative definitions and whether defining characteristics are considered properties, correlates, or consequences.

One methodological key lies in discovering and clarifying the tacit rules used for determining which of the innumerable features of a particular phenomenon are most salient for definitional purposes. Although a familiar strategy for establishing such rules is operational definition itself, which defines a particular phenomenon entirely in terms of whatever operational rules are used to measure it (Bridgeman, 1928), there are more general strategies. One of these is *formalism*. The strength of formalism lies in its focus upon the recurring *forms* or patterns of social life rather than upon the changing *content*, its "preponderance of the logical over the normative" (Wolff, 1964:xviii).

As a general rule, the logic of definition suggests that gang definitions would do better to focus upon the abstract, formal characteristics of the phenomenon rather than connotative, normative content. For reasons such as those already outlined, it is preferable that illegal activity not be part of the definition unless clearly specified as a correlate rather than a property. The general use of the term suggests that the essence of the gang lies in the weakening of conventional norms rather than a commitment to their opposite. Legal definitions can always add a further term to specify the more extreme, *delinquent gang*. A normatively neutral definition also focuses attention on the distinction between such similar collectivities as the gang and the crew, the latter sharing many properties, correlates, and consequences with the former but differing in that it *is* committed to crime and *is* organized for that purpose.

Among all the possible formal approaches to gang definition, one can be taken for illustrative purposes. One formal approach to gang definition that appeals to the logic of definition is the abstract view of the gang as combining a view of it as a social system (synthetic method) with a stress on its most salient organizational properties (analytic method). Heuristic rules for determining salience might yield something like the following: The gang is a spontaneous, semisecret, interstitial, integrated but mutable social system whose members share common interests and that functions with relatively little regard for legality but regulates interaction among its members and features a leadership structure with processes of organizational maintenance and membership services and adaptive mechanisms for dealing with other significant social systems in its environment. If the differences between properties, correlatives and consequences are stressed, such an illustrative definition might be supplemented with a statement of correlates indicating that it is traditionally but not exclusively male and territorial and is often associated with lower-class, urban areas. Descriptive consequences including perceived antisocial behavior calling forth negative reactions from significant segments of society should add further specification, which could be further supplemented with a range of examples and used within a larger context illustrating this meaning more fully.

The first part of this definition is somewhat similar to Jankowski's (1991). Like Arnold's (1966) definition, it focuses on abstract system properties. To a much greater extent than either of these, however, it is guided by the logical distinctions between the various methods of definition, as well as rules as to the salience of various systemic dimensions, or what has been termed the "developmental logic of social systems" (Teune and Mlinar, 1978:16). Those heuristic, methodological rules focus greater attention, for example, on *adaptation* and *accommodation* processes (Bailey, 1994; Colomy, 1992), the first involving mutual adjustments with other key social systems within the external environment, and the second with management of tensions and disruptions arising internally.

Space limitations preclude a more elaborate effort at a defensible definition of *gang*. Here we have tried only to clear the ground somewhat. We suggest that gang research and theory might make more consistent progress through greater attention to the logic of definition. It is important that researchers and theorists become increasingly aware of the differences among their implicit methodological approaches to definition so as to avoid at least the more obvious sources of confusion. Our hope is to have contributed in some small part to clarification of the problems.

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