

Book Review: Vanessa R. Panfil, *The Gang's All Queer: The Lives of Gay Gang Members*. New York: New York University Press, 2017. ISBN: 978-1-4798-7002-8 (Paperback). 312 Pages. \$28.00.

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When one thinks of gangs, the thought of “gay gangs” does not readily come to mind. Those two concepts – gays and gangs – seem incongruent when placed side by side, and that is true for a reason. Male gangs have a reputation as being hyper-masculine with all of the bravado, misogyny and homophobia that extreme status often entails (Panfil, 2017). And gangs are aligned with serious crime. As a 2015 National Institute of Justice publication made clear, gangs, particularly when coupled with drugs and guns, create a potent and volatile compound that is likely to result in violence. “Research about gangs is often intertwined with research about gun violence and drug crime. It is clear that gangs, guns, drugs and violence are interconnected” (NIJ, 2015, p.1). Also, one of the stereotypes of gay men as a group is that they tend to be nonviolent people more apt to care for, and be engaged in, matters related to fashion, style and opera (i.e. see reruns of the T.V. show, “Queer Eye for the Straight Guy” and the more recent redux program titled just, “Queer

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Eye,” or the gay couple on the T.V. show “Modern Family,” etc.) than they would be involved in criminal activity. Clearly, this stereotype is a narrow and inaccurate depiction of all gay men. Panfil (2017), in her book, *The Gang’s All Queer: The Lives of Gay Gang Members*, decimates these false perceptions through the use of the gay gang members’ own words to describe their lives and how they came to be in a gang.

Panfil’s book is topically rich with streams of explanation flowing from the basic mission: to heighten understanding of gay men and of gay men in gangs and to relay strategies that these men have employed to resist stereotypes of them. She utilizes symbolic interactionism as a theoretical frame for understanding the actions that gay gang members take and asks and answers who they are performing these feats for (who is their audience). She notes that most of the book is about how gay men make sense of “normative masculinity” which privileges heterosexual males who “exert power over women and achieve prestige through institutions” (5). The author promotes understanding when she discusses the challenges that gay men face in gang settings and why some of these men feel compelled to hide their sexuality, to disguise themselves as normatively male. Some of these men are so frightened by the prospect of other gang members discovering their orientation that they will hide it or even engage in disparagement of those who are openly gay.

Panfil (2017) seeks to deconstruct the assumptions about gay men and their masculinity that exist in our culture and are reflected in mainstream criminality. She wants LGBTQ people to be viewed as fully human and diverse, even if that means embracing hyper-masculinity and criminal involvement. “We CAN be gang members and we CAN commit crimes!” (9). She notes that her subjects sometimes engage in seemingly contradictory behaviors: adopting the hegemonic male persona in a straight gang, or joining a gay gang, engaging in competitive dance, dressing up in women’s clothing in order to sell sex, but still acting out violently when required for the gang. She promotes a queer criminology that recognizes LGBTQ persons and their complexity and lauds their failure to conform to heterosexist expectations.

Panfil (2017) interviews and observes 53 gay gang members from Columbus, Ohio. She gives their lives context by investigating their full lives, those that involve their neighborhoods, their families, and their peers. She spent extra time with about half of the 53 men. Her subjects were mostly minority group members (77% African-American, only 11% White), young (mean age of 21), most arrested or incarcerated at some point, as well as gay or bisexual. Five of the men denied being in a

gang, but they admitted involvement in criminal activity. The subjects were involved in 38 gangs, sometimes more than one simultaneously. Some of these gangs were exclusively gay, others were composed of some gay members and still others included mostly straight members.

Panfil (2017) notes that a common theme of the book is how gay gang members balance their gender identity. The expression or exploration of gender fluidity for these gay gang members was limited to certain times and places. Such expressions of stereotypical gay or feminine behavior was only socially acceptable in the presence of family members or other groups of LGBTQ members where they were able to avoid negative opinions of clichéd gay expressions. She analyzes three categories of gangs that comprise gay gang members: 1.) all gay gangs that contain only gay gang members; 2.) gay gang members in straight-gangs (out or closeted); or 3.) hybrid gangs (a mix of gay, lesbian or bisexual).

Panfil (2017) appears to hope that readers will understand gender identity through each gay gang members' experiences of culturally perceived normative characteristics of traditional masculinity. Participants observe and identify characteristics of normative masculinity through family members, friends, and their communities. It is within these social settings that gang members subconsciously ascertain what is considered an appropriate time and place to express or explore their gender fluidity. For example, Kevin describes occurrences where his mother "doesn't want him to be overly flamboyant out in public...in some instances, she'll be like, 'Oh you're so gay,' and be kidding around with me, but I'll do something in a different situation, and she's like, 'No, don't do that, not here, not right now.'" (37) Family members tend to support the gender fluidity, but more so in the confines of the home or areas that are known to be accepting of outward expressions of it. However, the author notes that family members are not as supportive of outward signs of gayness in business districts or places of work. There was an expressed fear by the family members, and the gay gang members themselves, that appearance as a *feminine* gay gang member or *stereotypical* gay gang member, or just the fact that they were gay (gender identity), might lead to bullying in the community and violent retaliation by other gang members.

Disrespect is a sub-theme throughout Panfil's (2017) book. There were numerous strategies used by gang members to get or keep respect; a primary one was to react with violence. Any form of rudeness such as being called out in public, homophobic slurs, or sexual implications voiced by assumed closeted gay gang members belonging to straight gangs, might lead to the perceived need to fight to defend one's honor.

Over two-thirds of the men in the author's study resorted to violence in reaction to anti-gay harassment. However, some situations prompted gay gangs to commit violent acts against other gay men, such as gang rivalries, retaliation, and power struggles. The subjects particularly disliked being called a "fag" or "faggot," and at times this was construed as a direct threat that would require a physical response.

The use of the terms "fag" or "faggot" was a subject that might lead to an immediate altercation if used by both outgroup or in-group individuals; the subjects thought that use of these words challenged their masculinity by implying they were weak or effeminate. According to the participants in the study, being called a "fag" or "faggot" was hurtful and the most derogatory term a person could use against them. "An assault on one's masculinity implied in the use of 'bitch' or 'punk' was offensive, but the assault on one's masculinity and sexual orientation implied in the use of term 'faggot' could rarely be ignored" (168). Sometimes just the willingness to address the aggressor and to defend one's honor would cause that aggressor to withdraw or retreat. As Max recounted "...I'm gonna stay and defend myself until it's over. Because I'm not a fag, your dad is!" (175).

When they had to fight because of constant harassment, often in schools, gay gang members frequently reported that the worst of the harassment abated. For example, Jeremiah, explained he recalls being in seven fights, one in each new school that he attended. He found that once he engaged in a physical altercation with his aggressor that was enough to discontinue any further altercations. Jeremiah believed that he demonstrated to the aggressor, and to other potential antagonists, that he was not weak, nor would he be regarded as a prospective victim. According to Panfil, attitudes or mannerisms that are considered feminine or gay are devalued in the gang culture she studied, and therefore, being able to successfully separate oneself from such stereotypical mannerisms was not only based on the need for gang survival, but also avoidance of threats of physical violence from non-gang members.

Panfil (2017) studies the many facets that encompass the lives of gay gang members and the explanations for gay gang development. Her exploration goes well beyond the culturally perceived notions and research classifying LGBTQ members, more specifically young gay men, merely as victims who do not defend themselves when faced with anti-gay harassment and violence. According to Panfil (2017), there is a lack of research investigating how members of the LGBTQ community defend themselves against anti-gay violence and defamatory interactions.

As the author states in her book, "...many scholars assume gay men have little choice or power to control interpersonal interactions and are fairly silent on whether or not gay men engage in serious crime, including violent street crimes, for comparable reasons as other similarly situated men" (7). Panfil's research would indicate that gay gang members do not fit the stereotype of gay men who silently accept their victimization. Gay gang members in her research actively contested these stereotypes and when pressed tended to take a stand against them, whether that be physically or verbally with behaviors and words that were used in self-defense or were geared toward prevention of further abuse.

Many of the participants described how their school groups came together and developed over time into the gay gang they came to be. Stories are relayed which shed light on the numerous strains and harassment that the young gay men endured during their school years. Ultimately, they found solace and a second family amongst other peers who also identified as part of the LGBTQ community. It is in these groups that they decided to cultivate a name, logo, rules, and guidelines for their clique. In essence, the participants created their own subculture (Vigil, 2016). As friendships expanded beyond their group, some gay gangs recruited through friendships. Persons who were friends with gay gang members and wanted to be part of their crew were the most likely to be readily accepted into the gang. However, some gay gangs had more traditional gang procedures, such as being jumped into the gang. Panfil (2017) found that whichever custom each gang used for initiation mattered less than whether gay gang members were let into the gang family where they felt accepted and safe.

Panfil's (2017) description aligns with previous literature which indicates marginalization and strains that lead to the inception of numerous street gangs throughout history. For example, Vigil (2016) uses the framework of "multiple marginality" to explain a range of factors that lead to youth gang development. The factors include place and status of a person, as well as how spatial isolation leads to barriers which can lead to the formation of many "gangs, street subcultures and identities" (Vigil, 2016, p. 285). Anderson's (2000) *Code of the Street*, illustrates the concept of spatial isolation of the urban poor leading to the development of a subculture where people abide by the rules of the street and subsequently acquire respect. It is clearly demonstrated in Panfil's (2017) book, that isolation and marginalization of young people based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or gender identity, within schools, families, communities, or criminal justice organizations, leads to the devastating consequences of gang involvement and criminal activity.

Criminal pursuits by gay gang members and their gangs, as described in Panfil's (2017) book, appeared to differ slightly from most documented gang criminal activity. Gang criminal activity can spur media attention particularly when it involves recent immigrants, rampant drug dealing or when it involves gunshots that sometimes kill innocent bystanders. According to Panfil's (2017) study, two participants very briefly explain their reasons why they may not be considered a "real" gang. For one, Ricky mentions why he does not belong to the B.O.B. gang, "No. I don't go around beating up women just because I'm bored" (89-90). As the conversation continued, the participants explain that they do not consider themselves to be a real gang but consider other gangs who gain the attention of the police and the courts due to their "hair-trigger tempers" to be "real" gangs (90). Many of the participants' violent actions were only prompted by the perceived need to react to disrespect they experienced because of their sexual identity. Yet, according to researchers, most notable violent actions by gangs are to illicit fear from the public, which did not appear to be the case according to the participants in Panfil's (2017) study.

Rios (1998) and Anderson (2000) provide insights into the over policing and subcultures that develop in part because of the perceived notion of high rates of gang violence. What Panfil (2017) does not include in her investigation is a clear explanation why she believes there is a lack of study of gay gangs by researchers. However, her book begins the process of filling that gap, as she provides vital insight into a critical area of research, while providing a voice to gay gang members so that they might describe their experiences as gang members. However, from a criminal justice standpoint, it would have been interesting to learn more about gay gang members' experiences with police officers and the justice system. Perhaps this is beyond the scope of her work, but some investigation of how gay gang members operate in response to criminal justice agencies and actors might have better illuminated the full gay gang member's world.

Panfil (2017) begins her concluding chapter by noting that she was reassured of the validity of her findings after viewing a 2015 news documentary about a gay gang in Washington, D.C. The author found the same structural gay marginalization in Columbus, Ohio. What she finds and argues is that gay gang members exist; they are complex human beings like everyone else; and, they are faced with the need to verbally and sometimes physically defend themselves from harassment. They defy pat descriptions and assumptions about how they are and why they

behave the way they do. They will engage in crime for the same reasons that others do.

The author knocks mainstream criminologists for the failure to concern themselves with queer criminology subject matter –like gay gangs --but then fails to be more specific about which books/articles failed in this manner. However, since this indictment of failed coverage likely includes everyone who has written about gangs in any comprehensive fashion in the last thirty years, maybe it would be fruitless to mention names or titles. Her case would be stronger here, though, if she could somehow guesstimate how many gay gang members there are. After all, if they happen to be a fairly large minority of gang members, the failure to note their prevalence and likely influence on gang behavior would be quite an omission.

A finding arising out of the author’s work was the claim that men who are strongly and vocally homophobic are doing so to shift attention from their own desire for a same sex relationship (several politicians and religious leaders, including religious politicians come to mind). This is a claim oft made, but to find that this is also true for gang members, should not be surprising (yet it was). As one of the Panfil’s (2017) subjects mentioned, such men are engaged in “impression management” and by being publicly abusive of gays and privately engaged in gay liaisons, they are not deflecting attention, but instead displaying their own self-loathing.

Panfil (2017) found that, paradoxically, embracing one’s gender identity and the need to display normative masculinity are both central to the world of gay gang members. These men were not embarrassed about their gay status – they were emphatically NOT self-loathers. Rather, they saw their true identity as a gay gang member as an important strength, but they lived in a world that was less accepting and thus knew that exhibiting normative male behavior is necessary to deflect harassment or negative consequences for themselves and their family.

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