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The writing on the wall: A post-positivist study of graffiti writing and tagging

Barbara Susan Archambeau

Cherie Ann Kagan

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A POST-POSITIVIST STUDY OF GRAFFITI WRITING AND TAGGING

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A Project

Presented to the

Faculty of

California State University,

San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Social Work

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by

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Approved by:

Dr. Teresa Morris, Project Advisor, Social Work   Date

Rita Coronado, Agency Representative

Dr. Teresa Morris, Chair of Research Sequence

ABSTRACT

This paper is an exploration of the culture of graffiti art and artists in a suburb of San Bernardino, California. The dynamics of graffiti culture and the range of community responses to it are examined through in-depth, informal interviews with 10 graffiti writers. Research participants were primarily recruited from a court-ordered diversion program for graffiti writers who are first-time offenders. An exploratory approach was used to analyze the impact of family, school, the juvenile justice system, community organizations and agencies on graffiti writers. In addition, the characteristics of each participant were identified. These include their demographic information, personal motivations and physical environment. An examination of the literature describes the history of several types of graffiti and their impact on communities. These phenomenon were examined through the lens of a post-positivist paradigm; meaning that the desired result of this research is the discovery of new theories, rather than the testing of old theories. This study identified the primary motivations of graffiti writers as fame, respect, pride and self-expression, and outlined alternative interventions suggested by graffiti writers themselves to redirect their behaviors.

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Introduction

Graffiti is not a recent phenomenon; scientists report finding graffiti on the walls of Pompeii and other ancient ruins (Rensberger, 1992). Traditionally, graffiti has been seen as a form of self-expression and rebellion. Experts speak of several different kinds of graffiti including writing on bathroom walls, political and social commentary, marking of gang territory and artistic expression (Tagging conference, Riverside, Ca. January, 1994).

Literature Review

(statement of fact?)

In New York City in the early 1970's a new type of graffiti closely linked to popular music and dance began to appear on subways and other public areas. Since then, this new subculture known as Hip Hop has grown to fuel the sudden explosion of graffiti (Brewer, 1992). This type of graffiti has become so common and popular among young people known as taggers that it now is seen by many as a major urban problem. The incidence of graffiti has skyrocketed and cities are spending millions of dollars to clean off the writing on the walls. For the purposes of this paper, the terms "taggers" and "graffiti writers" will be used interchangeably.

By the early 1980's the rise of Hip Hop culture had facilitated the exportation of HHG to many urban areas, including Southern California. The phenomenon of Hip Hop Graffiti has been researched in several major cities around the U.S and in Europe. An examination of previous research will be helpful and possibly indicative of trends in the San Bernardino area. However, Brewer (1992) and Glionna (1993) state that the specifics of this phenomenon cannot be generalized from area to area. Terms and opinions may vary from city to city and county to county.

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HHG writers are usually non-violent adolescence or young adults who use spray paint, shoe polish, grease pencils and marking pens to write on walls, buses, freeway signs and other structures. HHG writers who form "tagging crews", include kids of all ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds who dress in sneakers and baggy clothes, five or ten sizes too big for them (Brewer, 1992).

HHG writers are motivated by fame, artistic expression, power, and rebellion (Brewer, 1992). Fame is usually obtained by being prolific or having good style. Recognition by fellow taggers is the primary objective (Lachmann, 1988; Castleman, 1982). It is important to note that these factors may be closely connected to the developmental stage being faced by most graffiti writers, that is, identity vs. role confusion. Erikson (1966) describes the teen years as a time where people either succeed or fail to develop an identity. It seems that the development of identity may be an underlying factor to those motivations listed above.

There are three basic types of graffiti writing: "tags", which are signatures of the writer's street name; "throw-ups", which are larger, more expansive signatures written in block and bubble letters and "pieces" which are large, elaborate murals usually including backgrounds, designs, characters and other details. Brewer (1992) recognizes a higher class of HHG writers whom he calls "elite". This small, experienced group concentrates mainly on painting pieces and primarily consider themselves artists.

Younger taggers are initiated into the practice of graffiti writing through a mentor-novice relationship. Novices, known as "toys", usually meet their mentors in school or the neighborhood. It is interesting to note that the first task of the mentor is to relate to the

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novice that there is an audience for graffiti that can identify and credit specific writers for individual tags. This is truly a symbiotic relationship in that novices learn graffiti writing skills and style while the mentors benefit from the respect and recognition they get from their proteges (Lachmann, 1988).

Because of media publicity about gangs, many community members believe that a majority of the graffiti is created by gang members to mark their territory. According to Devon Brewer, an ethnographic researcher at University of California, Irvine, "Gang related graffiti marks turf, but Hip Hop Graffiti are associated with break dancing and rap music, and just say `I was here'" (Beaty, 1990). However, in a tough neighborhood, being prolific as a tagger can often get a young person some of the respect usually reserved for gang members. Lachmann (1988) found that time invested in tagging can earn a student a reputation for toughness that will keep him safe and allow him to finish school. Further, gangs sometimes employ taggers to mark territory. In this way, taggers can make money, obtain drugs and other benefits of full gang membership without the risks of being hurt in a gang fight or being arrested for a felony.

Community Perspectives and Responses

The issue of graffiti means different things to different people and there is a great deal of misunderstanding among people, depending upon their orientation. Although graffiti writers view their work as a way to gain a sense of identity, respect and power, the dominant culture labels their work as deviant. This thinking was verbalized by a local police officer, who referred to graffiti as "urban visual terrorism" (Tagging conference, Riverside, CA. January 1994).

At this point, it will be helpful to examine the attitudes, opinions and responses of the dominant culture. In communities where graffiti abounds, nearly everyone is affected in some negative way. However, there are several groups and organizations that are particularly impacted. These include: community members/taxpayers, the juvenile justice system, parents, schools, community youth agencies and taggers themselves.

Taxpaying community members are justifiably angry over property damage and the expense of graffiti removal. The juvenile justice system is ill equipped to deal with taggers, who are neither violent nor benign. Parents of taggers are often held financially responsible for the actions of their children, although they feel powerless to control them. Schools, a frequent target of taggers, are particularly impacted in these times of financial hardship. Community youth agencies, already seriously underfunded, are increasingly encouraged to respond to tagging with disciplinary actions. Taggers, themselves, are affected in that their behavior is becoming increasingly criminalized.

Clearly, the current systemic response to tagging is ineffectual; current policies are not stopping the problem from escalating. The rising incidence of graffiti writing is reflected by the rising funds cities spend on graffiti removal. It is estimated that Southern California cities spent over 100 million dollars last year to remove graffiti. Nationwide, graffiti removal cost approximately four billion dollars (Beaty, 1990). Further, legal ramifications for those caught graffiti writing are neither consistent nor appropriate. In some instances, since juvenile courts are so busy trying to deal with violent criminals, taggers know that there is really no penalty for being caught. In other cities, bored suburban youth caught for tagging are mixed in with more hardcore offenders where they must choose between

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becoming hardened ... or victimized.

Cities generally rely on a variety of methods to combat graffiti. Police crackdowns on writers, graffiti paint out programs, banning the sale of spray paint to minors and applying protective coating to walls are all common strategies. Previous research indicates that traditional, punitive methods of dealing with graffiti are ineffective because they fail to take the social and cultural aspects of graffiti into account (Brewer, 1992, Brewer and Miller, 1990). However, Brewer (1992) did an ethnographic study where writers themselves were asked to come up with alternative strategies to combat graffiti and to then rate their expected effectiveness. Several creative ideas were suggested. Those ranked among the highest by West Coast writers included the availability of legal walls managed by writers, public exhibitions and shows for graffiti art, and community centers where writers could learn and practice their skills. A Swedish study (Jacobson, 1990) seems to support Brewer's findings; when a community center was opened in Stockholm, 80% of the area's illegal graffiti was eradicated.

In light of the groups discussed here which are affected by graffiti, it is easy to see how the issue of tagging would have serious implications for social work practice. Social workers work with taggers, their parents and other community members in the following settings: mental health, juvenile justice, schools, child welfare, and community youth agencies. With the failure of the current system and it's response to tagging, social workers are the key to change due to the broad scope of services they provide in a multitude of settings.

This study is an exploration of this phenomenon with an emphasis on the community

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response to graffiti and the motivations of graffiti writers. An exploration of these issues will eventually lead to improvements in the community response to graffiti. It is our hope that this research will provide direction for those social workers attempting to improve services to those affected by tagging.

Research Methods

Rationale for Methodology

The current response to tagging is overwhelmingly punitive, stemming a desire to punish, rather than a desire to understand. Those involved tend to impose their own answers, instead of going to the source (graffiti writers themselves) to question the needs and motivations of this population. An examination of the motivation of taggers is crucial to providing a more realistic and effective solution. This study questioned taggers directly about what motivates them to tag and their thoughts regarding alternative solutions to the issue of graffiti writing.

Obstacles to Data Collection

In beginning this project there were several hurdles that needed to be addressed in order access research participants. Researchers contacted a variety of agencies that serve the population to be studied and encountered a variety of responses and obstacles. While some individuals were clearly helpful and receptive, others reflected to us the problems and issues inherent in agencies that serve this population.

Time and again, researchers would encounter unexpected bureaucratic barriers just as the data collection process was about to begin. Some individuals appeared to be unaware and unclear regarding their own agency's policies towards research and accessing

graffiti writers to act as research participants. Other agencies contacted by researchers responded with ambivalence. Negotiations would begin and then stop abruptly, as individuals failed to return phone calls and keep set appointments.

Other individuals and organizations demonstrated negative and patronizing attitudes towards their own clients. There was both confusion and negativity regarding why the researchers would prefer to conduct in-depth interviews with taggers, rather than simply have them fill out a short questionnaire. The consensus among these individuals was that talking to teens regarding their activities only serves to glorify their illegal actions. There was also a belief on the part of some that the subjects would not be willing to speak openly with two female researchers. Moreover, they viewed this population as being generally "inarticulate and not having much to say".

The agency that eventually provided access to research participants was a community youth intervention program. The director of this program recognized the need for discussion and interaction with teens in order to assess their needs. However, this agency was clearly overwhelmed by the needs of the community, underfunded by the city and unsupported by the community leadership.

As a result of the issues listed above, the agency was unable to adequately meet the community's needs or to provide realistic limits and consequences for the actions of the youth they were trying to serve. Due to the agency's lack of consistent follow through and the lack of legal consequences for taggers, the subjects did not feel compelled to complete community service hours. As research interviews were part of these community service obligations, the data collection process was negatively impacted. A great deal of time was

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spent recruiting subjects and setting up interviews. Despite these efforts, eight out of sixteen interview subjects did not keep their interview appointments. Of these, only one made arrangements to reschedule an interview at a later date. Paradoxically, those taggers who kept scheduled appointments not only spoke openly with researchers but also did not want the interview process to come to an end.

Although it was our intention to interview taggers from a number of institutional settings and employ a snowball sampling technique, researchers found that this was simply not possible given the constraints of time and accessibility. Due to the sensitive nature of graffiti writing and the legal implications of discussing criminal activity, a convenience sampling of taggers who volunteered to be interviewed was used.

Cultural Sensitivity

Cultural sensitivity was addressed when taggers were initially asked to be in the study. With this population, cultural awareness has less to do with ethnic sensitivity and more to do with sensitivity to the culture of today's youth. This particular cohort faces immense challenges due to their immediate environment as well as their developmental stage. Specifically, the teens interviewed were vulnerable to criminal prosecution as well as retaliation from their own and other crews as a result of participation in this study.

Clearly, confidentiality was of utmost importance. To address these issues, researchers spent time explaining confidentiality and reassuring participants that the researchers were students and not affiliated with any criminal justice organization. Additionally respondents were given the option of contacting the researchers, but researchers did not request identifying information from them.

<u>Data Collection Procedures</u>

A total of ten subjects were interviewed. The majority of these were accessed via a court ordered diversion program for first time offenders that was administered by the community youth intervention program. Those involved in diversion programs were credited with community service hours for the time spent in interviews. Those who were not, received no compensation.

As this study was framed within a post-positivist exploratory paradigm, no formal instrument was utilized. Instead, in essence the researcher served as the instrument. In depth interviews were employed as the major means of data collection. Interviews were between one and two hours in length and addressed three major questions. They were: What are the motivations of taggers? How do taggers view current community responses to tagging? What suggestions do taggers, themselves, have for alternative community responses? Additional questions included: How did you get started tagging and how long have you been doing it? Tell me about your crew. What are your other areas of interest? How does the community see you? Tell me about your family. What kind of materials do you use and how do you get them? Tell me about the risks involved with tagging. What do you think we should be asking you about tagging? These served to generate additional questions and avenues for further exploration.

During the interview process, a number of recording methods were utilized. Extensive notes were taken by both interviewers and a tape recorder was used at the discretion of the individual researcher. Accurate recording was essential with this population because the possibility of follow up contact was eliminated to protect the

confidentiality of the subjects. In order to obtain a degree of consistency throughout the process of data collection, the researchers conducted the initial interview together. However, in the interests of time, subsequent interviews were carried out by only one researcher.

Data Recording and Analysis

After each interview, the data was reviewed and coded. Researchers consulted with one another in order to minimize bias, refine interview questions and communicate additional issues that needed to be addressed. These new avenues of exploration were then incorporated into subsequent interviews.

Upon examination of the data, it became clear that there was a high consistency of responses among subjects. Although data collection involved loosely structured interviews, respondents often used the same words to describe similar feelings, motivations and experiences. Since the discovery of new theories was the goal of this research, reliability was not an issue. The study focuses on regional programs, populations and experiences that differ across neighborhood, city and county lines. Additionally, this is a highly changeable population. What is true today, may not be true a few months from now. On the other hand, information pertaining to subject's feelings and motivations may be highly reliable; more research is necessary to determine whether this is the case. For these reasons, valid rather than reliable measurement was considered to be an appropriate goal.

This study used the inductive method of data analysis. In carrying out the process of analyzing data. Concepts outlined in Strauss and Corbin's Basics of Qualitative

Research (1990), as well as strategies suggested by Guba and Lincoln in Naturalistic Inquiry, (1985) were used.

Open coding involved the labeling and categorizing of raw data into units of meaning, or concepts. Interview notes were closely examined in order to draw out the smallest meaningful piece of information that could be isolated. These units of meaning were then placed into categories based upon their content. They were then examined, compared, contrasted and further explored in an effort to gain new perspectives.

After all data had been labeled and categorized, the process of defining properties and dimensions began. For example, a category that emerged from our data was motivation. A property in this category was respect. Dimensions of respect include the frequency of writing, level of artistic style, degree of fame or recognition and location and visibility of writing. That is, the more one writes, the finer the style and the more visible one's writing becomes, the more respect one receives as a result.

Strategies outlined by Guba and Lincoln (1985) were used in order to operationalize the process of open coding and carry data analysis to its completion. Each unit of meaning was placed on an index card, which was then coded with the respondent's identification number. Information on the index cards was then used to facilitate the process of categorizing described above. Index cards were then reviewed a second time to ensure the accuracy of information, assigned categories, properties and dimensions.

After all the cards had been categorized and reviewed, the categories were then refined and examined to determine how they relate to one another and whether or not any aspect of the data had been overlooked. A final examination of the relationships and interactions

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among categories of data enabled us to come to some conclusions about the answers to the questions originally posed.

<center>Results</center>

Several categories emerged from the data. These categories include the culture of tagging, community responses and attitudes, alternative interventions and hopes and dreams for the future. These categories will be examined and, when appropriate, divided into smaller sub-categories. However, before analyzing these details, it is important to review the demographic make-up of our sample.

<u>Demographics and Family Structure</u>

<center>Table 1: Demographics of Participants</center>

ETHNICITY	
Latino	9
Anglo	1
GENDER	
Male	9
Female	1
FAMILY STRUCTURE	
Intact family	6
Blended family	3
Single parent family	1
AGE	
12	1
13	1
14	1
15	3
16	4

<center>12</center>

Table 1 demonstrates the demographic information of those who participated in the study (see Table 1 on previous page). As one can see from the table, the vast majority of research participants were Latino males between the ages 14-16, who came from intact families. Three subjects came from blended families, while only one came from a single parent family.

Culture of Tagging

Although there were three major questions addressed in this study, there was a vast amount of information collected that reflected the life experience of taggers. They described, in detail, their rituals, social structure, attitudes and values as well as the logistics of tagging. In order to truly understand the culture of graffiti writing, this information is invaluable.

Initiation to tagging.

One-half of the subjects began tagging at age 12, while in the seventh grade. It is interesting to note, however, that one respondent began tagging at the age of eight and reports that some taggers began writing as early as age six. The overwhelming majority of those taggers interviewed reported having a mentor relationship with an older, more experienced graffiti writer. These mentors initiated them into the culture of tagging, taught them elements of style and protected their younger proteges in a brotherly manner.

While only two subjects reported being actively recruited by crews, nearly half stated they had been involved in some type of initiation ritual. These initiations consisted of either being "jumped in" or given a "mission" (all tagging words in quotation marks

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can be found in the glossary - see appendix A). After being accepted into a crew, taggers are usually referred to as "toys", until they perfect their style.

The actual graffiti writing done by taggers usually consists of their nickname or "tag" and the letters signifying their crew. More experienced writers with better developed style often include scenes, cartoon characters and challenges to police such as "catch me if you can". Other taggers and young people know writers by their street names but authority figures do not.

Motivation.

A major goal of this study was to discover the motivations of taggers. Graffiti writers continue to tag despite the legal, social, and life-threatening consequences. Hence, motivation is a key factor in understanding the rising incidence of graffiti. In order of prevalence, taggers are motivated by fame, respect, the challenge or thrill, fun, pride, self-expression and anger at society. Other relevant motivations were identified by subjects. One respondent referred to becoming a tagger as "making a new you and taking on a whole new identity". This subject went on to say, "it's like being a movie star in my own film".

Precautionary measures.

As one graffiti writer stated, "Taggers always find ways to counter the city's strategies." Graffiti writers do this by developing techniques that will prevent detection and maximize protection. They then pass on these methods to each other, thereby creating and perpetuating their own rituals and cultural norms.

Because most tagging is done after dark, many taggers scan potential tagging sites

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during the day. Once a site has been selected, they return home, eat dinner, contact their friends, and make other preparations before leaving for the night. Taggers may stay out for as little as one half an hour to as long as all night. Respondents reported using several safety strategies which include dressing in black, wearing latex gloves, taking turns looking out for one another and concealing materials in baggy clothing and in other creative places. Graffiti writers wear latex or other gloves so if they are stopped by law enforcement they will not have incriminating paint on their hands.

Tagging materials.

In addition to those listed above, tagging materials include spray cans, tips of various sizes, mean streaks (grease markers), scribers, and different types of cleaning solvent for their hands. These materials are obtained through various means. Closely connected with the thrill-seeking aspect of motivation discussed earlier, the most popular and prestigious means of acquiring spray paint is through "can runs". Other means of getting materials include having a trusted adult purchase them, taking them from the homes of family and friends, "mobbing", receiving them as gifts from former taggers and winning them in "battles".

View of self and work.

There are a range of perceptions of how taggers see themselves and their work. A majority of subjects identified the importance of having a good style of writing. While some see graffiti writing as simply tagging, many view it more as an art form and an important means of self-expression. One subject went so far as to say that he would "buff out" his own work if he thought it did not look right.

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Subjects viewed themselves, for the most part, as normal kids who are misunderstood by a community that judges them based on the clothes they wear. As one tagger put it, "we're not bad people for what we do, we're just trying to express ourselves". All but one of the taggers interviewed are currently attending school, but their levels of interest and academic performance varied greatly. Some reported doing well in school, while one participant stated, "I like school. It's the biggest party ever. Everyone is there, but the class work gets in the way".

All respondents reported having friends who are not involved in graffiti writing. These friends appeared non-judgmental, regardless of their personal opinions about tagging. However, most research participants' primary source of social interaction was their crew.

Crew Structure.

Tagging crews have intricate, highly organized and adaptive structures. Participants described crews that ranged in size from five to seventy-five members with the average size being approximately thirty. Crews tend to be ethnically similar, although there were reports of some multi-ethnic groups. Some larger crews even have branches in other cities and states including Arizona and New Mexico. There is usually a leader or group of leaders for each crew; leaders tend to be older, more experienced graffiti writers. These leaders hold regular meetings where crew business is discussed. As taggers may be expelled from a crew due to inactivity, this business may include a discussion of which taggers are being more or less prolific. Other topics are potential members, conflicts with other crews and planning sessions for parties or battles. Some respondents even

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mentioned guest speakers coming to talk at crew meetings.

Within crews, there exists an informal hierarchy among members. This hierarchy is based on an individual member's level of prestige related to a number of factors. More prolific taggers generally have more prestige than less prolific taggers. Those who do "bombs", "pieces" or have a unique style are more respected than toys or members who lack style. Another method of gaining prestige is using daredevil tactics such as tagging the "heavens", tops of buildings, gangster territory and high traffic areas.

Another example of the intricate crew structure is the organization of "battles". When there is a rivalry between crews, one way of settling it is to challenge the other crew to a battle. There are dance battles, football battles and tagging battles. Typically, a representative from one crew calls a member of the other crew to make the challenge. A third crew is recruited to judge the competition. If no clear winner emerges from any of these contests, members may resort to "boxing" or another form of violence.

Social Interaction.

Aside from tagging, there are several social activities that are inherent in tagging culture. Nearly all subjects who were interviewed mentioned crew parties where music, dancing and drugs seemed to be pervasive. In short, most taggers reported crew members as their main source of social interaction. Many thought of their crew as a second family. From their crews they get support, companionship, a sense of belonging and protection. As one participant said, "At home, you have your family, but they can't protect you when you're on the streets - you need your crew."

<u>Dangers and Risks</u>.

According to the research, protection is a major concern facing all graffiti writers. There was a high correlation of agreement that gangs and gang violence present the greatest threat to their safety, followed closely by rival crews. Most respondents stated that their biggest fear was being jumped or shot by one of these groups. This usually occurs when a tagger is "caught slipping". All but one respondent reported either being jumped or being involved in a "scrap" and sustaining severe injuries. Four subjects required medical attention for these injuries. For this reason, some crews have rules that discourage taggers from going out in groups of less than three.

In the past several months, rumors about organized crime networks teaming up with local gangs against taggers have been circulating. According to the data, this was of great concern to some subjects while others did not even mention it. This may be due to the subjects' unwillingness to disclose this information, or simply that some subjects are unaware of such rumors. Taggers reported a variety of experiences with police officers. Consequently, this was of major concern to those who had been physically or verbally abused by law enforcement, but not for those who had no such experiences. The response of law enforcement will be reviewed more thoroughly in a later section of this paper.

Another theme of tagging culture that emerged from the data was the issue of violent behavior by taggers. While some respondents reported a minimum of violence and seemed almost unaware of the incidence of "tag-banging", others had extensive knowledge or personal experience. Violent behavior ranges from beating up rival crew members caught slipping, all the way to using lethal weapons. Several taggers reported carrying

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some type of weapon in order to protect themselves. These weapons included knives, brass knuckles, baseball bats and firearms. Approximately one-half of our sample reported carrying a gun at one time or another. Of these, three admitted to shooting at someone or having them shot in retaliation for previous violence directed at their own crew. One respondent acknowledged that a tagger from his crew had killed two members of a rival group.

As stated previously stated, drugs were clearly identified as a part of tagging culture. All respondents acknowledged the presence of drug use at crew parties. Drugs mentioned included: alcohol, marijuana, speed, PCP, cocaine, crack and LSD. Most of the subjects denied using the heavier drugs, but half of them admitted to using alcohol and marijuana. Several specified that drugs and alcohol are not to be used before going out to tag.

There appears to be a lack of consensus among subjects as to whether drugs and lethal weapons are an integral or peripheral part of the culture of tagging. It is clear, however, that using both drugs and weapons is a personal choice, rather than something that occurs as a result of peer pressure.

Community Response and Attitudes

Law Enforcement.

All taggers interviewed reported some interaction with law enforcement. 8 of the 10 had been arrested for tagging. They were caught, searched, taken to the police station, booked and fingerprinted, before being released to their parents. The other two had been stopped and questioned. They attributed not being arrested to remaining calm and polite,

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taking the necessary precautions (as listed above) and not fleeing the scene.

Of those respondents who were arrested, their experiences ranged from dealing with police officers who were business-like to those who were verbally and physically abusive. Some were threatened with being framed for more serious crimes, while others were counseled about the increasing dangers of tagging. Subjects reported feelings of fear and anger toward police officers, but seemed to remain generally neutral, except when officers behaved in either an abusive or ridiculing manner. Without exception, those arrested were sentenced to some type of community service hours.

Parents.

Parents appeared to become aware of their children's activities only following their arrest or when they sustained significant injuries. Most parent's reaction to their children being injured was a sense of fearfulness. Subjects stated that parents had a range of responses to their arrests. The majority of parents were angry and concerned when they became aware of their children's situation and enacted punishment as a consequence of their behavior. By and large, the punishment received was restriction. Six of the seven sets of parents who placed their children on restriction enforced this consequence. Nevertheless, parents were unwilling or unable to intervene significantly to effectively change their children's behavior.

Alternative Responses and Interventions

Taggers were asked what community responses and attitudes they had experienced. The only response subjects had been exposed to first hand was community service. All but one tagger interviewed saw this response as totally useless. It was viewed as a joke

and a nuisance. As one graffiti writer stated, "Police and community service only makes me more mad - it doesn't make me stop. I just keep tagging more." Thus, subjects report that these community service programs have the exact opposite effect from their intended outcome. Ironically, subjects used paint out programs to facilitate their tagging activities. Because they know where buffed areas are located, choosing sites for future writing is made easier.

All respondents reported that communities viewed them as gangsters, destroyers of property and menaces to society. Subjects believe these to be misconceptions. According to one subject, "They don't want to walk in our shoes, so they don't understand." Some respondents reported that they wished the community would see them as a closely knit, non-violent group of young people who look out for each other and use tagging as a means of expression.

When asked to come up with alternative community programs, graffiti writers had a wealth of ideas. Legalized walls and buildings for tagging, counseling programs and youth centers were the most frequently identified alternatives. Other ideas included dance clubs, sports programs and art classes. Although all respondents recognized that no program or solution will be completely effective in eliminating tagging, these ideas would cut down on graffiti writing among specific groups.

Four of the ten subjects interviewed reported that they are no longer tagging. Only one stopped tagging as a result of being caught. The other three chose to stop for family, personal or safety reasons. All taggers viewed the discontinuation of their activities as a personal choice that could not be impacted or dictated by parents, law enforcement or

outside entities. Several recipients stated that they see tagging as something they will grow out of as they get older.

Future

When subjects spoke about their plans and dreams for the future, all but one had significant life goals. Seven respondents stated that in five years, they would like to attend a college or trade school. Two were hoping to achieve this via college football scholarships. Two reported that their goals included getting a good job. More long term goals included wanting to have families. Five desired to work at some type of profession, while one wanted a good job and another, to join the Navy.

A tremendous amount of information was generated from these interviews. Clearly, research subjects not only had a lot to say about their experiences, but they were also very articulate. The following section illustrates some of the feelings and experiences of individual graffiti writers.

Case Studies

Case study I.

Lorenzo lives in a middle class neighborhood with his parents and older sister. He has been tagging since age 12, when an older relative introduced him to his style of writing. Lorenzo says that he likes to tag because he can "get known, get respect and feel good inside". He also tags as a means of expressing his anger at the negative and prejudiced way the community views him, based on the clothes he wears.

Lorenzo states that, to be a tagger, you have to be willing to take risks and face dangers from both the police and rival crews. For him, this has meant being arrested twice

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by police and being badly beaten and stabbed by rival crew members. As a result of this, he was sentenced to probation and community service, and now carries a gun with him for self-protection.

Following his last arrest, Lorenzo has become increasingly involved with a neighborhood gang. He tags for the gang, for which he receives protection, prestige and, at times, payment. Although not an official gang member, he also participates in their violent and criminal activities. Lorenzo parties with gang members, drinking alcohol and using and selling "crank". When asked, however, he says he sees his involvement with gangs and drugs as unrelated to his tagging.

Lorenzo says that community service programs are a "waste and a joke", and he will never stop tagging. Instead, he would like to see more youth centers and community programs, including counseling. His hopes for the future include earning a football scholarship so that he can attend college and perhaps become a lawyer. In the same breath he adds "but I'm not sure if I'm going to be alive".

Case study II.

Robert has been tagging for three years. He lives with his parents (who speak Spanish) and four brothers and sisters in a low income Latino neighborhood. Robert joined his first crew at age 12. It was a dancing crew that held dance battles to the music of hip hop, rave and house. Crews would compete against each other, while another crew would be the judges. If there was no clear winner, the two crews would compete in a tagging battle, often followed by a rumble or free-for-all fight. When more crews joined and battles became more fighting and less tagging, the crew disbanded.

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Robert was "jumped in" to another crew six months ago. This crew is well-organized, holds monthly meetings and has a network of crews throughout Southern California, Arizona and New Mexico. Robert tags for fun, for respect and because he feels it is addictive. He states tagging is the way different crews communicate, by crossing each others' tags out and leaving threatening messages. Within his crew, there are tag-bangers. He is not involved in this, but does carry a baseball bat for protection.

Robert has been arrested twice by the police. Police were verbally and physically abusive. They tried to provoke he and his friend into a fight and threatened to have them arrested for attempted murder. He was assigned to community service hours, which only makes him angry so that, instead of stopping, he just tags more. Robert would like to see legalized walls and community sports programs. Football, he says is the one thing that he stops tagging for. He states, "we're not as bad as they think we are. I give people respect, but they don't return it".

Case study III.

Henry lives with both parents and a younger brother in a working class Latino neighborhood. He was recruited and "jumped in" to his first crew when he was 8 years old. He tags to get noticed and to get attention. Henry describes tagging as youth's way of creating their own language. He states,

"billboards say that graffiti is not Picasso, but to us it is. We have nothing but the streets, so we make them our own [by tagging them]. It's the art of it. You paint it, you make it your own. You take other people's property and make it look better."

Henry says being in a crew is a means of gaining a "new identity, new friends and a new style of clothes". He states he would rather be on the streets because his own family

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has abused him in the past. His crew is like his family, backing him up and taking care of him.

Henry was caught and arrested with six friends and sentenced to community service hours. The officer who arrested them was verbally abusive. Henry says abusive attitudes by police only angers him, making him want to tag even more.

Henry believes that the community sees tagging as the destruction of property, only because they don't understand its meaning. Although he completed his hours and has done well in the program, he sees community service as "worthless". He says its only purpose is to keep kids busy so they won't tag, but it doesn't work. As alternatives, Henry would like to see programs that designate legal walls, buildings and paint supplies to kids. In addition he sees a need for youth centers, where kids can go to "express their feelings without adults around", and a youth dance club. Henry enjoys dancing and says, "a dance club would get me off the streets".

Case study IV.

Oscar lives with his grandmother in an ethnically-mixed, working class neighborhood. He began tagging 3 years ago to "get known, to get back at society and to feel good". He also states he was pressured into it by his peers. Oscar was initiated into tagging by an older relative, who became his mentor and taught him how to do bombs and pieces.

Oscar and his cousin started a crew together and held parties with hip hop and rave dance battles. Other crews would bring drugs and alcohol. Dance battles would lead to tagging battles and violent rumbles, in which rival crew members would pull out guns and

knives. Oscar stayed away from both drugs and the violence.

Oscar was caught and arrested three times. Some police treated him well, while others were verbally abusive as they, "drew their guns and searched me. They made me feel less than human". He was assigned several hundred community service hours. These experiences made him feel angry and want to tag even more.

Oscar believes the community sees tagging as something negative and destructive, but "they don't understand, they don't know how close taggers are. They lump taggers and gangsters together".

Oscar began working solo, painting pieces and bombs. He was "caught slipping" one night by a rival crew member who put a gun to his head. He quit tagging three months later. When he told his friends, they jumped him and beat him with their fists until he became unconscious.

He would like to continue tagging, but says, "watching your friends get hurt, knowing someday it might be you...it's not worth it".

Discussion

The results described in the previous section can be used to gain some insight regarding the culture of graffiti art and artists. Some of the data fit in well with previous explorations of this issue. Other data showed aspects of this phenomenon that seem to be specific to the particular time and place studied. Most importantly, the data collected can be used to postulate some possible interpretations of the life experiences of the taggers interviewed. Moreover, suggestions regarding the effectiveness of intervention strategies are given.

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There is a high level of agreement on most issues addressed in the interviews. Although specific taggers in the study have had different experiences, most have similar reports on the issues. For example, although Ramon had used drugs and Oscar had not, they both admitted that drugs were present and a part of tagging culture. So, while reports about the phenomenon and culture of tagging are similar, it will be useful to note the differences of experience of individual graffiti writers. There are two specific areas where experience varied widely: drugs and violence.

The findings regarding drugs and violence seem to indicate a lack of peer pressure as it is usually conceived. Half the participants clearly stated that they do not use drugs or they only use marijuana or alcohol although their friends use a variety of substances that include those thought to be more dangerous such as cocaine and PCP. Similarly, some participants have rejected violence as a way of life although some have not. We did not receive any reports of graffiti writers being coerced into taking drugs or committing acts of violence. This is a common theme in gang culture: initiates are sometimes forced to commit acts of violence in order to join a gang. This is opposed to typical initiations in tagging crews which usually involve proving one's self as strong or possessing a good writing style. With tagging crews, a major theme is self expression and it seems as though this value is respected on a number of levels.

Comparison to Previous Research

There were a number of findings that were predictable in light of earlier research done by Brewer (1992) and others cited previously. Tagging crews in the area covered by our sample seem to have similar structures and motivations as those found in the research.

Issues of identity and socialization seem to be paramount in all groups studied.

However, there were several significant differences that appeared in our study. It seems that, for the participant's in this study, the practice of tagging has outgrown it's Hip Hop roots. Research participants reported listening to a variety of music that included oldies, rap, techno, rave and hardcore as well as Hip Hop. Although dancing was reported as an important aspect of tagging culture, subjects knew of no connection between the two activities. All but one subject were unaware of the roots of this type of graffiti.

Unanticipated Results

A disturbing finding that was generally unexpected was the prevalence and severity of violence reported by this group of taggers. Most of the previous research made a definite distinction between the violence associated with gangs and the artistic expression linked to tagging crews. Some of the more recent research (Glionna, 1993) mentioned the phenomenon of tagbanging but it seems as if this aspect of tagging culture is now more common and more lethal.

Limitations of Research

Clearly, this study was limited by several factors. First, the researchers encountered multiple obstacles in dealing with those agencies who work with taggers. The researchers' experience appears to be indicative of the problems and issues inherent in these agencies: bureaucratic barriers, ambiguous agency policies, confusion regarding the knowledge and interpretation of these policies, lack of follow-through by agency staff and negative, patronizing attitudes towards their clients.

On the other hand, the agency that demonstrated care and concern for their clients and attempted to provide them with needed services, (the community youth intervention program) did not receive the necessary community and financial support. In addition this agency did not having any backing from the court system. Courts referred the subjects to the agency, but did not give the agency the authority to enforce legal consequences in the event that subjects did not complete their sentences. Therefore, subjects had little incentive to show up for the community service program and, by association, for the research interviews. Because of the researchers decision to not request personal information from subjects (such as address and phone number), researchers generally unable to follow-up on those subjects who did not keep their appointments.

Second, although the researchers found it interesting to examine the attitudes and experiences of a group of taggers from a specific geographical area, these results cannot be considered relevant for other areas and populations. Despite the richness of the data obtained, this data reflects the experience of only 10 youth out of tens of thousands who live throughout this county.

Interpretation of Results

With respect to the three major questions posed by this study, the results provided a wealth of information. It is interesting to note that four of the most significant motivations given for tagging are: fame, respect, pride and self expression. One possible interpretation of this is that taggers tag because they do not feel recognized, respected and proud in other areas of their life - school, home and family. If taggers see writing on a wall as a legitimate means of self expression, perhaps it is because all other forms of

expression are closed to them. One teacher explained it this way: instead of asking why kids tag, we should be asking why kids feel like they do not have a voice in society.

If we equate graffiti writing with expressing one's self and one's opinion, then the results of this study clearly show that the young people interviewed feel that they do not have a voice. They believe that society does not want to hear what they have to say. If this is true, then society is in denial regarding current social conditions and the reality of young people today.

Rather than trying to read and understand the scrawled message of today's youth, society prefers to erase all traces in paint out campaigns. It is as if to say: this does not exist. Paint out programs, the most common community response, is basically a punitive measure that does little to provide taggers with real life skills or consequences for their actions. In this context, community service becomes a means of forcing teens to wipe out their own self expression.

There is a long world wide history of the implications of closing off a people's means of self expression. When individuals use strategy after strategy in an attempt to be heard and all avenues are ultimately closed off, historically the most common response is violence.

This phenomenon of violence has a unique impact on youth and their motivations because of the specific developmental stage that they face. All subject were teens who are in the stages of identity vs. role confusion (Erikson, 1966). For youth who tag, the struggle to form one's identity is impacted by the negative attitudes of a community who views them as gangsters and menaces to society. These perceptions create a sense of rebellion, common among youth, and an us vs. them mentality which is reflected in the

additional motivations of anger at society and a desire to "mess up the city". Feeling

rejected by the dominant culture, taggers create their own idea of culture in which to

define themselves. This culture includes rituals, social structures and norms of behavior.

However, this culture of their own creation requires that they define themselves within the

context of a hostile environment of violence, drugs and crime. An important question,

then, becomes what is the long term impact of forming one's identity in a virtual combat

zone?

Interestingly enough, when asked what alternatives they would like to see to the

dominant culture's response as well as to their own culture of violence, all respondents

provided positive ideas. They have recognized the need for solutions that are both socially

acceptable and will also provide them a means of self expression. That is, they can

express themselves in ways that society can hear: a win-win situation.

Finally, although they outlined the above alternatives to reduce illegal graffiti, all

subjects clearly identified that it will never be completely eradicated. This appears to be

an accurate assessment. Graffiti is by no means a recent or regional occurrence, exclusive

to modern day American society. In reviewing the literature, there is strong evidence that

graffiti has been in existence for thousands of years. Additionally, there is research citing

the world wide presence of graffiti, from Russia to South America. Thus there is a long,

historical and global precedent for expressing one's self through the writing on the walls.

Suggestions for Future Research

It is the researchers' hope that this study has shed some light on new theories about

what motivates taggers to tag and what types of alternative interventions may be most

effective. Given the limitations of this study outlined above and the small sample size, there are many opportunities for further research. For example, a similar study may be conducted using a larger sample size and involving taggers from multiple geographical areas. In addition, research involving pilot programs incorporating the alternative intervention strategies suggested by taggers could prove to be especially beneficial. Other avenues for research include: an analysis of the family structure and developmental history of youth who tag, a content analysis of graffiti writing and crew names, evaluations of existing community programs, a longitudinal study of what happens to youth who tag as they grow into adulthood, and an exploration of how taggers view their world and those around them.

Implications for Social Work Practice

It is also the hope of the authors that these new theories may lay the groundwork for the implementation of alternative community programs for taggers, such as those suggested above. This has broad-reaching implications for social work practice. Social workers, who work in a multitude of community settings, would most likely be an integral part of implementing these programs as well as renovating current strategies that are ineffective. For example, one idea that occurred to the authors as a result of this study is to create programs in which taggers are given more appropriate consequences for their criminal actions, while gaining positive, useful life skills. Clearly, social workers can be important agents for change both within agency settings and in the community at large.

Appendix A

Table 1: Demographics of Participants

ETHNICITY	
Latino	9
Anglo	1
GENDER	
Male	9
Female	1
FAMILY STRUCTURE	
Intact family	6
Blended family	3
Single parent family	1
AGE	
12	1
13	1
14	1
15	3
16	4

Appendix B

Glossary of Tagging Terms

Battle: contest in which two or more individuals or tagging crews compete

to see which one excels; Dance battles and tagging battles are the

most commoned

Blasted: shooting a gun or being shot at

Blocking: drawing bombs along a series of walls on one   street

Bomb: a throw-up that has not been colored in

Box: fight

Bud: marijuana

Buff: to remove or paint out a tag

Can run: when taggers enter a business en masse to steal cans of spray paint

Carrying: armed with a weapon

Caught

slipping: getting caught tagging by a rival crew

Cool off: a period of time in which one stops tagging

Court

checked: being kicked out of a crew for not tagging enough

Crank: a form of methamphetamine

Dogging: picking on someone or putting someone down

Getting up: tagging one's name prolifically

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Glossary of Tagging Terms (continued)

Going riding: going out to tag

Heavens: tagging done on high freeway signs

Hitting up: the act of tagging

Jumped in: initiation rite for new crew members that

                       involves being hit by multiple crew members

Jumped out: being kicked out of a crew

King: old New York term for leader; crew leader

Mean streaks: grease markers

Mission: initiation for new crew members that involves being sent out to tag

                       one's name and one's crew name

Mobbing: when a group of taggers attack a rival crew   member who is caught

                       tagging

OG: orginal gangster; one who has been active for a long time

Pieces: large, elaborate murals including designs and characters

Punking: picking on someone or putting someone down

Put on check: ordering or pushing someone around

Raver: one who dances to rave and techno music

Racking: going into a store and stealing spray paint

Rocks: spray paint tips

Scrap: fight or rumble

Shanked: stabbing someone or being stabbed

Glossary of Tagging Terms (continued)

Slashing: crossing out tags of rival crews

Soda pop: spray paint cans

Tag-banging: defending one's writing and reputation through the use of violence;

                     similar to gang violence

Taking-out: when a person or crew loses a battle and can no longer tag under

                     the same name or moniker

Throw-ups: larger tags written in block and bubble letters

Toy: novice or inexperienced tagger

Wild style: style of writing in which all letters are connected

Appendix C

List of Crew Names

CAP   Criminal Art Production

CBS   Can't Be Stopped

CFK   Crazy Fucking Kings

EK   Enemy Kings

HICE   Homies in Cool Effects

HBO   Home Boys Only

HSH   Hitting Society Hard

KCA   Kids Creating Art

KCD   Kids Creating Destruction

MAK   Modern Art Kings

MWA   Most Wanted Artists

NTC   Never Too Clever

OFS   One Fresh Style

RAK   Rebellious Art Kings

RTS   Running The Streets

SMK   Sick-Minded Kids

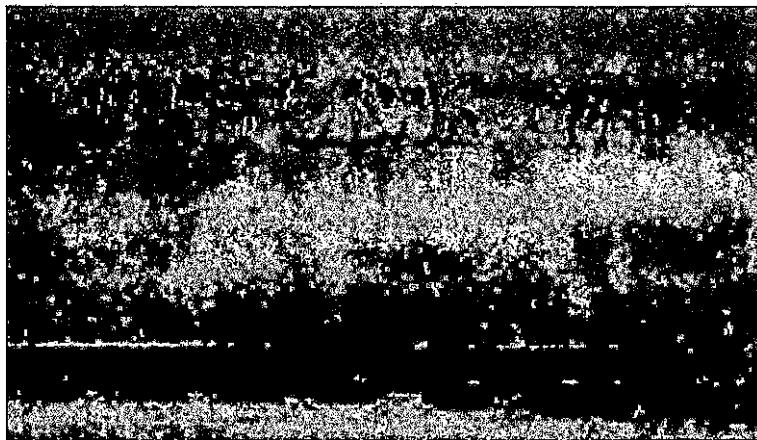SSK   Sick of Society Kings

TWK   Those Wanted Kids

YGW   Youth Gone Wild

Appendix D

Photographs
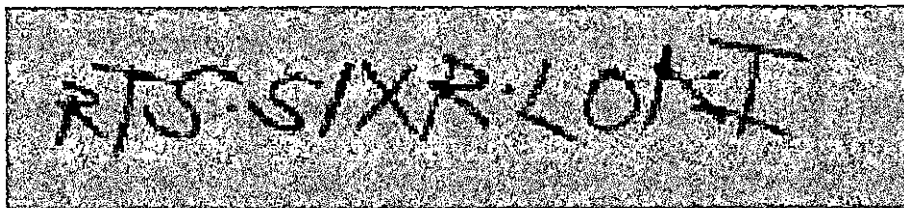

Mural done by youth in community intervention project.

Throw - ups near railroad tracks.

Examples of Throw - ups.

Tags of Crew Name and Street Names.

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