

# Influences on the Mexican American Youth Gang Discourse on Local Television News

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*This paper examines the production of the Mexican American youth gang story for local television news from a Gramscian perspective. It argues that the production of these stories is the result of a social process and therefore is socially constructed within a context in which power is used to influence the discourse about Mexican American youth gangs. Such discourse is related to the prevailing ideology and generally serves to further the interests of those in power. Different theoretical models that attempt to explain the representation of the news media's reporting of the Mexican American youth gang are critiqued. Data were collected by interviewing different persons in the community, including news workers, police officers, social service providers, community leaders, and young Mexican Americans.*

**KEYWORDS** *gangs, hegemony, local television news, Mexican American, stereotypes*

Understanding the portrayals of minorities on local television news rests on an understanding of news production as a social process. By “social process” it is meant that news stories are points of convergence where individuals, groups, and institutions struggle for the opportunity to control different discourses that influence the definition of social reality (Carey, 1992; Elliott, 1972; Hallin, 1994; Schudson, 1978; Turow, 1984; van Dijk, 1991). These discourses, or forms of expression that establish parameters for what is said and thought (Acland, 1995, p. 10), contain, among other things, the attitudes, beliefs, and biases constructed and maintained by the social system. It is for this reason that the Mexican American youth gang news

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story is not a “true” or “objective” rendering of the experiences of Mexican American youths nor can it ever be. Instead, the Mexican American youth gang news story reflects in varying degrees the different discourses surrounding the social phenomenon known as Mexican American youth gangs. Because a society is based on a system of power and privilege the news stories produced also incorporate such a system and attract discourses that pose little or no threat to the existing social order and simultaneously cast to the margins of legitimate discourse competing interpretations of the Mexican American youth gang, which threaten the power and privilege of the elite. Far from being “objective reports,” Mexican American youth gang news stories are the result of the work of social actors—journalists, sources, and audiences—who are engaged in a tug-of-war (Gans, 1979, p. 81) over competing meanings. Too often, the result is what Conquergood (1994a) refers to as the media’s “demonization,” or dehumanization, of inner-city gangs (pp. 24, 40).

This paper critically examines how different social actors attempt to control the discourses that find their way into the production of the Mexican American youth gang story on local television news so that, over the long run, it comes to reflect the dominant ideology in the form and content that have become journalistic clichés: violent, drug addicted, minority youths. Such news stories assume the form and content that they do because such form and content serve a purpose. In very broad terms that purpose is to contribute to the stability of society and further the interests of those in power.

A critical view of the Mexican American youth gang discourse presented on local television news reveals that the basic assumptions on which such discourse rests are rarely questioned. When such questions are raised many of the arguments for a proactive stance against the Mexican American youth gang problem begin to unravel. Answers to a simple question such as, “What constitutes a gang?” can unveil a scene of at best naive optimism, and at worst racism and deceit. What is gang activity in one setting, among young people from a certain social class, in a particular geographic space, may be dismissed in an upper-class, suburban setting as a youthful indiscretion. For example, after records were stolen from a fraternity house on the Colgate College campus, revealing organized, systematic, illegal behavior sanctioned by the group, including gang rapes, drinking, drug use, and the promotion of racial and sexist attitudes, associate professor of sociology Rhonda Levine stated, “If these were working-class kids or poor kids in an inner-city ghetto, we’d call them a gang and we’d call them pathological” (Warshaw, 1989, p. 207).

It is important to study the production of reports on local television news about Mexican American youth gangs because they have become a key element in discourses of inner-city Mexican American communities. Drug abuse and violence are two topics that are intimately tied to the Mexican American youth gang. The economic decline of inner-city Mexican American neighborhoods in many parts of the Southwestern United States has come to be closely tied to the issue of youth gangs. Faulty parenting skills and even cultural shortcomings are mentioned as possible reasons for the problem of youth gangs in Mexican American neighborhoods. These perspectives have failed to produce a viable solution for the Mexican American youth gang problem.

Critical examination of the production of the Mexican American youth gang story for local television news allows for the development of different perspectives on

this social phenomenon. Rather than relying on unquestioned, and often unarticulated, assumptions as springboards for studies about Mexican American youth gangs, critical theory requires that such assumptions be examined for evidence of how the social system is reified in the production of local television news. An understanding of the Mexican American youth gang stories for local television news from a critical perspective also opens the possibility for combating the stereotypes perpetuated in such reports. Studying television news stories about Mexican American gangs brings to the forefront the arbitrary nature of the meaning of these stories, and the relationship of such meanings to the prevailing ideology or hegemonic discourse.

In the following pages I outline the basic assumptions of critical theory. I then present the text of a Mexican American youth gang story aired on local television news in Austin, Texas, and data culled from other news stories as well as interviews with newsmakers, police officers, and community leaders. Finally I discuss these findings and conclude with some recommendations for further research.

### **Literature Review**

Critical theory can be traced back to the works of Marx, Gramsci (1971), Althusser (1971), Horkheimer and Adorno (1994), Marcuse (1964), and Habermas (1991), among others. A key element running through the works of these theorists is that inherent in the process of communication is a struggle for power over the definition of social events (van Dijk, 1993). Such power manifests itself in economic, social, and cultural activities. Ignoring the role of power in the communication process leads to a distorted view of social interaction. Yet power is difficult to define. Persons who control large amounts of capital are said to have economic power. Others who may control resources by virtue of their elected or appointed status as heads of city, state, or national governments or agencies are said to have political power. Still others may be able to influence cultural processes because of their artistic talent or prestige within the artistic community or both. Others may have power in the sense that they can resist attempts by those with economic, social, and cultural power to control their behavior. In the process of news production different persons and organizations use their power to influence how social reality is defined (Gans, 1979, pp. 332–333).

Critical theory argues that communication is the manifestation of the thoughts and beliefs people have about themselves and their relationship to others. It focuses on what human beings make of their social experiences to discover how they should act and live (Hallin, 1994, p. 18). Explaining why we act and think the way we do reveals how behavior and beliefs are often the result of the tension of both arbitrary and immediate solutions to practical problems as well as the products of a long, historical process.

Within critical theory Gramsci's (1971) work on how ideology and institutions contribute to the stability of society is especially helpful when studying the Mexican American youth gang story on local television news. A primary question guiding Gramsci's work is how power is exercised in the modern, liberal, democratic state (Kellner, 1990, p. 17). Specifically it is concerned with how elites maintain their rule, or hegemony, without resorting, except in extreme cases, to physical violence. A significant element in this aspect of the theory of hegemony is the role played by the

mass media, especially the news media, in the manufacturing of a consensus that supports the prevailing ideology and the interests of the ruling elite while simultaneously appealing to a broad segment of the audience to maintain their legitimacy and in this way contribute to hegemonic rule.

A main tenet of Gramsci's (1971) work is that the stability of society is closely tied to the prevailing ideology. This ideology encompasses a worldview that rests largely on unspoken assumptions. The result of this worldview is a system of social values that, in the process of communication, are seamlessly incorporated into everyday living and come to be accepted as "common sense." This "common sense," a form of rhetoric, serves to reaffirm those in power by organizing thought and behavior around the interests of the dominant classes (Fiske, 1989, p. 169).

According to Gramsci's theory of hegemony government makes up only one part of the system of power. Institutions and organizations that also accept the prevailing ideology and incorporate it into their everyday operations make up the other parts of the system. The family, the church, political organizations, unions, and the mass media all support the prevailing ideology through their organizational structures (both formal and informal), programs, and activities. These institutions, organizations, and associations serve as a secondary line of defense should the core institutions find themselves weakened or delegitimized (Femia, 1981, p. 191).

The mass media, because they are among the major institutions in advanced capitalist societies, have a political function in that they too promote the dominant ideology (Femia, 1981, p. 27; Kellner, 1990; van Dijk, 1987, pp. 40–46). This dominant ideology, which permeates every aspect of an organization, shapes production, including cultural artifacts like news stories.

News organizations, because they depend on large audiences, can be said to mediate the views of dominant groups as well as those of the subordinate. For this reason news stories can be described as points of convergence reflecting different discourses. However, those discourses are the result of access to resources such as money, people, and technology. Persons and organizations with access to money to hire professionals to write press releases and then distribute those releases through the mail, fax machines, and the Internet can tilt the balance of power against those persons and organizations who do not have access to such resources. It must be kept in mind that the news media, similar to other institutions, have to maintain their legitimacy in the eyes of the public, and so their role is not solely to maintain the social order. Indeed there may be times when the need for legitimacy conflicts with their role as promoters of a point of view associated with a government body or elite institution. In this sense the role of the news media goes beyond merely promoting social stability, as a functionalist interpretation of the role of the mass media in society would argue.

Gramsci recognized that ideologies are not written in stone. As different groups struggle for power, the dominant ideology may shift to accommodate these challenges and promote social stability (Hebdige, 1979, pp. 15–19). With respect to news stories about Mexican American youth gangs, different groups and individuals attempt to influence the production of these stories to, consciously or unconsciously, promote their varied interests in the public sphere.

A major weakness of Gramsci's theory of hegemony is the definition of hegemony itself. According to Gramsci (1971) hegemony is the result of the various ways that

institutions can shape the cognitive and affective states through which persons perceive and assess social experience. At the root of this process is the economic system because it organizes the system of rewards that is used to discipline various members of society for the benefit of the elite. The legal system also is crucial because it defines acceptable and unacceptable behavior in the business and social spheres.

But it is important to note that for Gramsci the routines imposed by the economic and legal system need not lead to blind conformity. Indeed, the irony of routines is that they can make possible an escape from the grip of ideology and even lead to nonconformist thinking (Femia, 1981, pp. 30–31). Thus, the concept of hegemony goes beyond mechanistic and Marxist approaches to the study of mass media in society. However, it fails to make explicit how some people can come to a critical assessment of their secondary status and force changes in the economic and legal institutions that can lead to the improvement of their economic and social conditions.

### **Explanations for the Mexican American Youth Gang News Story**

There have been several perspectives on how the Mexican American youth gang is portrayed by the news media. Some of these perspectives posit an all-powerful news media that can dictate how people think and act. Others offer explanations based on sociological theories about the news media. Still others look at cultural and ethnic differences to explain how the Mexican American youth gang is distorted by the news media. But all of these perspectives, to some extent, fail to examine the basic assumptions that undergird the Mexican American youth gang story and their relationship to the social structure and the ideology that permeates it.

The “all-powerful media” perspective argues that Mexican American youth gangs were fabricated by the police and the news media. McWilliams (1990) dismissed the Mexican American gangs of East Los Angeles in the 1940s as inventions of the police and the press. He notes how relatively minor incidents involving Mexican teenagers and young adults were played up by the newspapers and the police in the spring of 1942, “to build up, within a short period of six months, sufficient anti-Mexican sentiment to prepare the community for a full-scale offensive against the Mexican minority” (p. 206). For example, McWilliams notes that a fight between two groups of Mexican American youths in the summer of 1943 was reported by the press as a fight between the Belvedere “gang” and the Palo Verde “gang.” He also mentions that in all of these reports about gang fights the ethnicity of the boys involved was never overlooked (pp. 206–207). Indeed, McWilliams wryly points out that in Los Angeles in 1942, the saying “boys will be boys” had been revised to “boys, if Mexican, will be gangsters” (p. 216).

Gonzalez (1981) also attributes the creation of the Mexican American youth gang to exaggerations in the press that were supplied by the police. Writing about the early part of 1942, when the Los Angeles Police Department and the Los Angeles press were focusing on and dramatizing delinquency in Mexican neighborhoods, Gonzalez notes:

This period can be seen as the time during which the “gang” image was developed and “marketed.” During this time the Los Angeles community was being informed as

to the extent and nature of these “gangs.” Thus, the “gangs” were *created* and *defined*.  
(p. 136)

Such “powerful effects” or “hypodermic needle” models of mass communication have been dismissed by communications scholars for failing to explain how social groups often have resisted and rejected media messages (Fiske, 1989; Hall et al., 1978). These “powerful effects” models assume a passive audience lulled by messages transmitted by a monolithic system of mass communication that is controlled by a homogeneous ruling elite. The explanatory power of such a model leaves much to be desired when we consider that Mexican American agricultural workers, for example, rejected the stereotype of themselves as “stoop laborers” and organized for improved working conditions. Also, many Mexican American high school students in the 1970s, despite being labeled “culturally deprived,” and in some cases even “mentally retarded,” demanded classes that would improve their chances of securing a college diploma rather than accept being “tracked” into vocational classes. Although it would be foolish to deny that the mass media have some power to influence audiences, examples like the ones just cited indicate that it would be equally foolish to attribute absolute power to the mass media.

Another perspective on Mexican American youth gangs and the news media accepts the existence of Mexican American youth gangs but questions how these are used to promote stereotypes about Mexican American youths. Turner and Surace (1956) found that over a 10-year period the *Los Angeles Times* came to associate the term “zoot suit” with Mexican American youth gangs. They argue that the word “Mexican” had too many positive associations for the people of Los Angeles. Such positive associations about Mexican culture would not have allowed Los Angeles residents to react violently to Mexican youths said to be members of gangs. However, by referring to these youth gangs as “zoot suiters” the *Los Angeles Times* was able to whip readers into a frenzy that led to several days of attacks on Mexican American youths. What is striking in Turner and Surace’s (1956) study is how the discourse about Mexican youth was altered to zoot-suit crime and in that way facilitated the unleashing of a community’s fears and anxieties. Although they are careful to note that questions about the effects of the mass media are far from settled, Turner and Surace’s approach also rests, albeit tacitly, on a powerful effects model of the mass media. Granted, theirs is a “softer” version of the one described by McWilliams (1990) and Gonzalez (1981), and therein lies the strength of their argument. Turner and Surace move away from the theory that the media created gangs toward one that begins to examine the interaction between the mass media, in this case newspapers, consumers, and the social environment.

Zatz’s (1987) work relies more on a cultural model of how the news media interact with other social forces to explain one Southwestern U.S. city’s reaction to a perceived threat from Mexican American youth gangs. Her analysis of the gang phenomenon in Phoenix, Arizona, in the 1980s led her to conclude that, “It was the social imagery of Chicano youth gangs, rather than their actual behavior, that lay at the root of the gang problem in Phoenix” (p. 153). Zatz points out, based on quantitative and qualitative data gathered from juvenile court referrals, that gangs and gang-related crimes were a reality. However, contrary to the reaction to gang-related crime, the police did not organize special units to deal with regular street crime,

corporate crime, and other types of illegal activity. She notes in her study of court referrals in Tucson, Arizona, that those Chicanos believed to be members of gangs were guilty mostly of having been involved in "minor squabbles." Only one referral out of 518 "gang boys" was for a nonfighting violent crime. "Contrary to the impression given by the police that gang members were 'armed and vicious' . . . it appears that gang boys typically engaged in relatively minor squabbles, and not in murder, rape or serious violent crimes" (p. 140). The imagery of gangs as violent converged with that of Mexicans as "different" to facilitate the police and news media's promotion of a "moral panic." Identifying Mexican American youths as responsible for community disorder paved the way for an increase in the number of social control agents in Mexican American neighborhoods (Zatz, 1987, p. 154).

What is not clear in Zatz's (1987) study is exactly what role ethnicity played in the creation of the moral panic about Mexican American youth gangs in Phoenix and Tucson. Moral panics related to youth have been created in societies much more homogeneous than many of the U.S. communities that are currently said to be experiencing gang problems. In many cases social class differences, rather than ethnic differences, seem to serve as a basis for the creation of a moral panic about youth gangs (see Pearson, 1983, for a study of "hooliganism" in Great Britain; Cohen, 1972; and Hebdige, 1979). This should not be interpreted as a denial of the role that ethnicity plays in the gang discourse, but rather as recognition that the role of ethnicity in this phenomenon, and how it interacts with other factors, such as social class, proportion of the ethnic population, immigration patterns, and quality and quantity of media coverage, and so on, is far from settled.

The work of Conquergood (1994b) is relevant especially to the study of Mexican Americans and local television news. Taking an ethnographic approach based on communication/performance theory Conquergood studied inner-city gangs in Chicago. Similar to many researchers of gangs, Conquergood found a wide disparity between the media representation of gangs and gang members and the organizations and members he encountered in Chicago's Albany Park neighborhood (p. 24). According to Conquergood differences in value systems are the basis for such media exaggerations. In contrast to the middle-class value placed on individualism and self-sufficiency, the gang places value on community and mutual aid. This contrasting value system leads to a clash of lifestyles and worldviews that leads to the demonization of gangs in the media, which, citing Said (1979), he refers to as "urban orientalism" (1994b).

The strength of Conquergood's (1994a, 1994b) work is its explanatory power in the sense that he provides a host of reasons for the attraction gang membership may hold for a young man living in the inner city. His work helps explain the need for mutual support among economically deprived and socially marginalized young men. However, it falls short in its recommendations for alleviating the gang "problem." Conquergood (1994a) calls for a reorientation of communication strategies targeting the sense of social justice of community leaders and policymakers but fails to explicate exactly how this reorientation is to come about (p. 55). In another paper, Conquergood (1994b) states that part of the solution for the gang problem is communication: "We should and must talk with them" (p. 12). Such a reductionist approach overlooks that in the process of communicating we express our value systems and beliefs. Talking with gang members about their needs and concerns presupposes a radical

shift in the value systems and beliefs of both the middle class and gang members. Conquergood never outlines how this shift is to come about.

## Method

The research method for this study consisted of field interviews with police officers, newswriters, community leaders, as well as young people, some of whom claimed to be members of gangs. These categories were not necessarily exclusive. For example, some community leaders active in antigang campaigns admitted to having been members of gangs as teenagers. In some cases community leaders were adolescents involved with the Roving Leaders Program, which encourages primarily young Mexican Americans to stay away from gang violence and drugs.

Between April 1993 and January 1995 27 persons were interviewed about Mexican American youth gangs and their representation on local television news. Among the 27 informants were 12 newswriters, 9 community leaders, and 6 police officers. Among the newswriters were 3 news directors, 1 general manager, and 3 anchors. Several television news reporters were also interviewed. Community leaders included a parish priest, neighborhood organization representatives, activists, parents, and social program directors or community program directors. Among the 6 police officers were current and former members of the gang unit, a deputy police chief, and patrol officers.

All interviews were recorded on microcassette when permission was given by the informants and the conditions allowed for such recordings. Interviews in offices, private homes, and classrooms were not a problem in terms of audiorecording. However, some situations made audiorecordings impossible. For example, during a "ride-along" with an officer from the Austin Police Department no recordings were made. The length of the ride-along, an entire eight-hour shift, the ambient sounds, and almost constant radio communication would have made such a recording inaudible. Also, when interviewing some members of the Roving Leaders, an organization dedicated to preventing gang violence by using young people as role models, I was asked by the director not to record the very young members of the organization to protect their privacy. Interviews were loosely structured. As long as the topic of gangs and the media remained the general focus no attempt was made to force the interviewees to agree or disagree with prepared questions or comments. The survey approach was rejected in favor of an open-ended, more exploratory, approach.

As a Mexican American male studying the production of the Mexican American youth gang story for local television news I was aware that my presence might influence discussions at production meetings, the assigning and coverage of stories, and the content of interviews. It also may have influenced how the community leaders and young Mexican Americans I interviewed responded to my questions. On the one hand White newswriters and informants may have assumed that as a Mexican American I would automatically take an adversarial role vis-à-vis the news media. Mexican American community leaders, on the other hand, may have assumed that as a scholar I would promote the values and beliefs generally found in the reports of middle-class academics, reporters, news anchors, and producers. In addition to these

two extremes there were many variations in the interactions between myself and sources as the report that follows demonstrates.

In addition to the interviews, local television news stories about gangs that aired in the Austin market also were examined. Access to these stories was facilitated by permission from the three network-affiliated news stations in Austin, Texas, to observe the television news production process first hand. In addition to interviewing newswriters I sat in during production meetings, went out into the field with crews producing general news stories and some stories on gangs, sat with reporters in editing suites while they edited their stories, and sat at adjacent desks while they researched stories. At one of the stations videocassette copies of locally produced gang stories were made available. I also searched for stories on databases at two of the stations and then screened the stories at the archive of local television news housed at the Austin History Center.

### **Television News Stories**

In light of Gramsci's theory of hegemony we can expect the dominant ideology to find its way into the institutions in which routine activities are carried out. This is one reason why it is not surprising that Mexican American youth gang stories share many characteristics. The role of police, "lost youth," and the efforts by the community to bring them back into the mainstream are three of the most prominent. In the process of incorporating some discourses about the Mexican American youth gang into a television news story certain elements are prominently featured while others are downplayed or ignored.

On May 22, 1993, a television news report that occupied 2 minutes and 20 seconds of airtime profiled the youth gang and drug problems in the Montopolis area of Austin, Texas. The allocation of more airtime for a "package" means that the reporter needs to search for more information than is usually required for the voice-over or "spot news" story. The primary source for the Montopolis story was an Austin police officer who regularly patrols the area. A community organizer and president of Citizens on Patrol in the East (COPE) also contributed to the story. COPE is one of several neighborhood organizations in Austin that is the result of an Austin Police Department effort to involve the community in a partnership with the police to reduce crime. These organizations typically are composed of neighborhood residents who undergo several hours of instruction and training provided by the police department in neighborhood surveillance techniques and proper procedures for working with local law enforcement agencies. Their role is to deter crime by reporting suspicious activity to the police. The president of COPE also was active in the city-funded Roving Leaders Program. Roving Leaders consisted of Mexican American teenagers hired to contact and counsel other Mexican American teenagers said to be members of gangs or "at risk" of joining gangs and getting involved with drugs. The teens and young adults hired by the Roving Leaders Program advise these "at-risk" youths to stay away from gangs and drugs. The president of COPE was frequently a source in news stories, both electronic and print, about gangs in the

Austin area. For the Montopolis news story he provided a panel of teenagers and young adults who addressed a group of Montopolis residents about the gang problems in the area. Mexican Americans made up the overwhelming number of on-air participants in this report. In addition, the Montopolis neighborhood where the report was videotaped is recognized in Austin as a predominantly Mexican American community. However, in the news story African Americans are seen in the first two shots and a few African American adults are seen in the audience listening to the panel of young people. One Black teacher is seen asking panel members a question. It should be noted that African Americans were not part of the panel of teenagers and young adults addressing the audience.

A key issue raised by the police officer in the Montopolis story is the apathy of parents who reside in the area. In this case parental apathy is said to be demonstrated by the poor attendance at a workshop about gang problems in the area. The reporter opened the story with video and audiorecordings of the officer as he walked alongside her in the Montopolis neighborhood. The reporter then introduced the officer and the story: "Officer [A] patrols the Montopolis area in Southeast Austin. He says there are many problems here including drugs and gangs (KVUE-TV 24, May 5, 1993, 6:00 P.M.)." The viewer never learns about the "many problems" which may be exacerbating the problem of drugs and gangs. Instead, the text hones in on the two problems, drugs and gangs, that are to be the focus of the story. By isolating and decontextualizing the problems of drugs and gangs the path to a family-oriented values solution, in this case "parental involvement," is paved. The problems of drugs and gangs are presented as individual and family problems, not social problems. The viewer then hears the officer express his frustration about the apathy of parents in the community: "That's sad—that the community doesn't want to get involved."

The issue of parental apathy is a recurring one in Mexican American youth gang stories. For example, another report alluding to parental apathy among Mexican American's aired on August 8, 1993. The KVUE television anchor introduced a statement by the Deputy Chief by noting, "Officers say more parenting—not more policing—may be the key to stopping the violence." This was followed by a comment, or soundbite, by the Deputy Police Chief:

As long as parents let their kids go out and roam the streets all night long, ride around in cars together, carrying guns or standing on the streetcorner acting as look-outs for dope dealers because they bring in more money than they can get on a legitimate job—we're still going to have problems. (*KVUE-TV 24 News*, August 30, 1993, 6:00 P.M.)

Moreover, in a KXAN-TV 36 news story a Mexican American teenager is heard saying, "The reason for me getting involved in gangs [is that] I wasn't getting attention at home" (November 10, 1993, 6:00 P.M.). His mother is described by the reporter as someone who had been "caught up in a dark world of drug dealing and using. . . . Everything else, including her children, seemed to slip away." The role of parents, especially the mother, is given close attention in these stories and often presented as the "cause" for gang behavior in children. However, several persons I

interviewed, including two police officers, mentioned that they knew of young people who had become involved in illegal activity who came from good homes, with hard-working, caring parents.

Through interviews with reporters and screening stories it was learned that a small number of people in the Austin area are contacted for on-screen soundbites or comments on gangs. The police are the primary sources for information on gangs. One reporter who had produced a three-part series on gangs in Austin explained that she “wanted to show what it was like out on the streets of Austin where there’s a large amount of gang activity” (personal communication, March 31, 1993). To accomplish this she relied on the police, “I just asked the police officers to take us (she and the photographer) where there’s a lot of criminal gang activity on a regular basis and they took us to East Austin, Northeast Austin, and South [Austin]” (personal communication, March 31, 1993). Indeed, I was referred to the police when I started interviewing reporters. Soon after I started talking to reporters at one Austin television station about gangs and gang stories I was given the office and pager numbers of the Austin Police Gang Unit and assured that they were willing to talk about the gang situation. I later interviewed several members and former members of the Austin Police Department Gang Unit.

The names of certain community leaders and social service workers also keep coming up. Reporters justify approaching these sources because they are relatively easy to reach and can be depended on for statements and comments that can be used as soundbites: “We want someone who will speak well, you know? Someone who will come across [well] on camera” (personal communication, March 31, 1993). The police, because they are accustomed to speaking to the news media, are among the most reliable sources for soundbites. Next are community leaders and social service workers. Quite often these persons seek out the media to promote themselves or their programs. One community leader said that he had approached television stations with story ideas several times. He described how he got one station to cover a story he had suggested: “We were going to do a graffiti sting and I called (news director) at channel [X] and told him, ‘Hey, look, myself, officer [Y] from our neighborhood police station, are planning on doing a graffiti sting and we would like you to send out a reporter to cover this story’” (personal communication, president of COPE, July, 1994).

In addition to relying on a small number of sources for information about gangs, persons who are not seen as “friendly” to the news media tend to be ignored. A group of known community activists was described by one Mexican American reporter as persons who just “bitch about things” (personal communication, February 20, 1994). This reporter went on to say that these activists resort to unproductive name calling and labeling using terms such as, “racist, racial bias, bigots, instead of dealing with [the problem of negative reporting about East Austin] in an educated way, like the Chamber (Hispanic Chamber) wants to do” (personal communication, February 20, 1994). What is most significant for the purposes of this study is that the head of the organization this reporter was criticizing refused to acknowledge that his neighborhood in East Austin had a gang problem: “We as residents say, ‘Wait a minute. Where is the gang problem? Where are they?’” He went on to say that he never sees gangs in his neighborhood. In addition to the criticism that the local media focus on the gang issue when reporting about East Austin, this community leader said that on

several occasions he had organized events for children and teenagers in his neighborhood, sent out press releases, and called local television stations, but was not successful in getting media coverage. One example he cited was a pre-Halloween block party organized in the neighborhood on Willow Street, an area notorious for gang activity:

*GF:* We had over 800 kids attend . . . but not one media showed up. The newspaper was not there. There wasn't one incident. There wasn't a fight or anything near a fight. All it was was people that came out of their homes, the kids that came and enjoyed a safe Halloween.

*Tovares:* And did you invite the media?

*GF:* Yeah, we put out press releases all last week. (personal communication, November 1, 1994)

## Discussion

Several findings stand out as particularly significant against a critical approach to the production of the Mexican American youth gang news story. First is the small number of persons responsible for the stories. On the reporting side this is understandable since typically a newsworker is assigned a "beat," and likewise for law enforcement personnel and agency employees. These persons are assigned specific tasks as part of their job descriptions and are expected to carry out those tasks. However, only a handful of persons in the community are tapped as sources for these stories. Thus, one reason for the narrowly focused portrayals of Mexican American youth as members of gangs can be traced back to a limited number of sources that meet the needs of newsworkers and news organizations.

The absence of alternative perspectives to the portrayal of the Montopolis situation serves to reinforce the views presented. Residents of the Montopolis area who do not share the point of view of the police officer, the panel members, or persons in the audience, are not part of the story. That the overwhelming number of parents in the Montopolis area may not be concerned about the community meeting on gangs because their own children and the other children in their neighborhood do not belong to gangs, use drugs, or engage in random acts of violence is a point ignored in the report. In addition, the possibility that many parents are working on Saturday morning to provide for their children is never raised. By omission the report promotes the illusion that there are no alternative views to the hegemonic interpretation.

However, the small number of sources is not, in and of itself, the problem. This is because a small but well-selected group of sources representing a cross section of the community could occasionally lead to a different perspective on Mexican American youth gangs being aired by local television news. The current practice of privileging certain persons as sources slants and in this way influences the Mexican American youth gang discourse on local television news. But such influence is beyond the work and thoughts of a few people. Gramsci's theory of hegemony casts a wide net that encompasses all of society. Although a small number of persons facilitate the work of the reporter by providing information and soundbites that can be incorporated easily into the news story format, such information and soundbites stem from common

sense, and in this way reinforce, rather than challenge, hegemony. This is one of the ways the assumptions behind the stories remain beyond question. And although a more randomly selected pool of sources to comment on the Mexican American youth gang situation may lead to a broadening of the parameters within which this topic is discussed, this in itself is not a guarantee of more diverse discussion about this matter. Other social and cultural forces are at work that influence the Mexican American youth gang news story.

The second significant finding is the angle that is used in the stories about Mexican American youth gangs. They are almost all “problem people” stories (Wilson and Gutiérrez, 1995 p. 158). In the Montopolis story the reporter began with a sentence about the problems the community is facing. The viewer then heard the officer express his frustration about the apathy of parents in the community: “That’s sad—that the community doesn’t want to get involved.”

The issue of parental apathy is a recurring one in Mexican American youth gang stories. The example cited above in which the anchor introduced the segment with the Assistant Chief of Police with the words, “Officers say more parenting—not more policing—may be the key to stopping the violence,” supports the finding that gang stories focus on the problems individuals are having, rather than on how the community may be creating problems for minority young people.

The Mexican American youth gang story serves to define a problem—a neighborhood suffering from too many gangs and drugs—as well as the parameters within which that problem will be addressed. As in most television news, the parameters are set at an individual level, as opposed to a social or institutional level. Parents and the adolescents they are said to have lost control of become the focus of the gang stories. This is not surprising, since the nuclear family is the institution that serves as the basis for all other institutions in a capitalist, free-enterprise economy. Individuals learn to relate to the rest of society within the nuclear family. For this reason the breakdown of the family is interpreted by many as an indication of the breakdown of society. The stereotypical image of the Mexican American community as fragmented and deteriorating, and thus causing problems for the rest of the community, is reinforced by Mexican American youth gang stories.

How various interested parties in the community are vying for media attention is the third significant finding resulting from the examination of the Mexican American youth gang stories on local television news. This finding supports the view that the Mexican American youth gang story is the result of the efforts of different persons and institutions in the community to control the discourses that make their way into these stories. The interests of the different parties involved contribute to the form and content of Mexican American youth gang news stories. At times these interests coincide, at others they clash. However, rarely will the reporting on Mexican American youth gangs go beyond the parameters set by the prevailing hegemony or “common sense.”

Reporters have deadlines and quotas. Stories must be ready by airtime. Reporters must also demonstrate that they are productive; that is, they must deliver stories consistently. Although there are no hard and fast rules about the number of stories a reporter must deliver to the station, a general rule of thumb is three to four stories per week; however, many reporters feel compelled to deliver at least one story every working day. Such pressure forces reporters to fall back on routines and practices

that have proven themselves useful in the past. Fear of losing one's job, receiving poor evaluations from supervisors, and failing to get raises and promotions, disposes reporters to accept the routines of production.

The police use the news media to promote their work. Although it may appear to be a symbiotic relationship, reporters are more dependent on the police for information than are the police on local television news for publicity (Chibnall, 1977). This is because the police are a publicly funded organization with a public information office that has experience dealing with the news media. Police officers without access to reporters will continue to work, whereas reporters without access to the police will find themselves in the unemployment line.

The Public Information Office of the Austin Police Department provides newswriters with information for stories. Some of this information, but by no means all, is about gangs. The number of gangs and gang members in the city, the number of crimes they commit, their activities with other gangs in other cities, and so on, are examples of the information provided to reporters by the police department. Almost all of the television news reporters I interviewed provided me with the names, office numbers, and pager numbers of police officers in the Austin Police Department Gang Unit. They stated that members of the Austin Police Department Gang Unit were very cooperative and always willing to discuss the gang situation in Austin. Indeed, I found members of the gang unit and other police officers to be most willing to provide information about youth gangs. The fact that much of the information about gangs comes from the police department makes it difficult for reporters to question its authenticity, especially when the information contributes to a good story.

Newswriters do have some influence on the production of the Mexican American youth gang stories, but it is tempered by the demands of production. Newswriters need to deliver stories for air. In addition, newswriters are aware that they work in a competitive environment, which is undergoing dramatic changes (McManus, 1994). Generally, although the number of television news reporters in the Austin market has been decreasing, the number of stories incorporated into the newscasts have been increasing. Shorter stories that convey only main points are encouraged by management and consultants. This situation leads to an overreliance on those sources that reporters can depend on to provide information that can be packaged easily into a news story format.

In interviews I conducted several newswriters questioned police data about gangs, but none produced stories challenging the data. The relationship between the news reporter, especially the crime reporter, and the police is balanced in favor of the police as sources of information. The reporter needs the police more than the police need the reporter. One reporter admitted to "schmoozing" with the police to get information on a regular basis (personal communication, March 17, 1994). These factors—the demands of production, economic considerations, and relationships with police departments—contribute to the content and form of the Mexican American youth gang story. One other major influence is the people in the communities where Mexican American youth gangs are reported to be a problem.

Community leaders, such as teachers, neighborhood association presidents, PTA members, and so on, also are sometimes asked for comments about the gang situation in their areas. Community leaders have different perspectives on the Mexican American youth gang problems. Some use the youth gang problem to increase their stature

in the community, whereas others see it as a total fabrication perpetuated by the police and the news media to sidetrack efforts to organize for economic and political purposes.

Several persons expressed distrust of some community leaders who were speaking about the dangers posed by Mexican American youth gangs. The Deputy Chief of Police stated that there were some people in the community who did not want the gang problem to go away. He explained, without naming names, that such people use the gang theme to attract media attention. He implied that such media attention could translate into “name recognition” should the person decide to run for public office in the future (Deputy Police Chief, personal communication, July 25, 1994).

Another group of community leaders is not asked by reporters for its opinions. This group held views of the Mexican American youth gang phenomenon that were diametrically opposed to the ones that typically came across the television screens. Some leaders in the Mexican American community expressed disgust with the Mexican American youth gang stories aired by local television news. With respect to the reporting on Mexican American youth gangs, one leader, who claimed he could not get news media coverage for positive activities in his neighborhood, stated:

It's political. If the media is buying into it, they [community leaders] will play into it. Here you have the media show up and they'll exploit the kids. They'll say, “All these teens, these are wanna-be's. Had they not been in this program they'd probably be gang members right now.” So the media goes out and they highlight the program. (personal communication, November 1, 1994)

Another group of community leaders consisted of persons who were organizing the community to fight the gang problem in East Austin. This group accepts the gang phenomenon as real. Their only protest is aimed at the lack of funding for social service and educational programs for young people in their neighborhood. One woman was looking for funding for Mothers Against Gangs, an organization she had started after one of her sons had been shot in what was reported by the local media as a gang fight. She revealed in an interview that her son had been shot by the mother of a member of a rival gang and not by gang members. Nothing of this was ever reported on local television news. Another member of this group of leaders was contemplating running for local political office in the near future.

These findings support the idea that the Mexican American youth gang story, similar to other news stories, is not the result of “objective” and “value-free” reporting. Nor is it the result of “balanced” coverage. Instead, different groups struggle—by organizing and attending community meetings, calling news stations, sending out press releases about events and organizations, carrying pagers and making themselves available for interviews, and so on—to make their voices heard to relate their interpretation of the activities of Mexican American youths to the larger community. The state, embodied in the police, is the most organized group contributing to the gang discourse. Through the organization of manpower and information technologies the police can greatly influence the production of the Mexican American youth gang story. Reporters also can influence the production of these stories but are constrained by deadlines, economics, and their dependence on police sources for the information that can be processed into news. Community leaders are divided on the portrayal of

Mexican American youths as members of gangs. Some of these leaders, the ones usually asked for soundbites and background information on the youth gang problem, may find that the fear of Mexican American youth gangs facilitates the flow of funds for programs believed to help youths. Another group sees the reporting on Mexican American youth gangs as a ploy to derail time and effort away from political action and focus the Mexican American community's attention on what they believe to be a red herring.

## Conclusion

This paper has examined how different persons, groups, and organizations attempt to influence television news stories about Mexican American youth gangs. The findings indicate that the construction of the Mexican American youth gang story is the result of various players, some of whom are at times in agreement, other times at odds, over the Mexican American youth gang discourse. These tensions are mediated by the prevailing ideology that imposes the parameters within which the Mexican American youth gang problem is presented by local television news. The youth gang as a real and negative phenomenon in the Austin Mexican American community is accepted and promoted by most, but not all, of the social actors involved in the production of these news stories. Two leaders of a neighborhood organization expressed opinions and perspectives diametrically opposed to those seen on local television news. They found it abhorrent that Mexican American leaders and newswriters would promote a gang problem in exchange for funds for community programs. These community leaders also complained of being ignored by television news reporters.

The resources available to influence the Mexican American gang story on local television news vary among individuals and organizations. Not surprisingly the police appear to be by far the best organized and well-funded group for the purpose of contributing to the construction of the Mexican American youth gang story. These two features give the police tremendous influence, but by no means absolute power, over the production of these stories. Newswriters also have some influence but do not exercise it in ways that will raise questions about the portrayals of Mexican American youths as members of gangs. Mexican American reporters who during interviews expressed doubts about such stories did not produce stories that presented such views. The reason seems to be that such action would jeopardize their relationship with the main sources for such stories, the police. Instead, newswriters rely on the police to provide them with standard information about Mexican American youth gangs that easily can be packaged into stories. Newswriters are constrained in the production process by the need to produce stories for as little expense as possible while still attracting an audience and by their reliance on the police for information about youth gangs. These constraints do not allow for much flexibility in the production of the youth gang story. Some Mexican American reporters, but none of the Anglo reporters, expressed a belief that the gang problem was exaggerated by the news media.

The evidence gathered and presented here provides support for the perspective that the Mexican American youth gang story on local television news is the result of

a struggle to influence the discourses about Mexican American youths and to a large extent the discourses about the greater Mexican American community. The production of the Mexican American youth gang story is the result of a push-and-pull relationship among different players working within a social, economic, and cultural arena, who attempt to construct a representation of Mexican American youth gangs that favors their organization and their role within those organizations. Persons interested in the Mexican American youth gang issue have some stake in how it is constructed and perceived. This should not surprise us, since all politics involves a certain amount of self-interest, and the construction of the Mexican American youth gang news story, like all news, is tied to the political process.

The relative lack of power among leaders in the Mexican American community also sheds some light on the approach of the news media to this social phenomenon. If the leaders are willing to focus on the gang problem in their neighborhoods, then newsmakers are more willing to trade such information for airtime. If, however, the leaders want to question the claims and assertions about the gang problem and challenge the fairness of the reporting, the news media are far less likely to make time available.

The Mexican American youth gang story, like all news, is created by social forces and does not exist beyond social, economic, and cultural influences. Recognizing those influences and examining how they interact may lead to strategies for altering and eventually retiring the Mexican American youth gang news story and the stereotypical portrayals that define it.

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