

Racism, Ethnicity and Hate Crime

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The aim of this paper is to discuss the findings of a recent study of 'ethnic youth gangs' in Melbourne, and to indicate the relevance of these findings to discussion of hate crime. The paper begins by briefly describing the social context within which the 'race debate' in Australia has emerged, and the nature of hate crime directed at minority groups. It then provides an extended examination of street conflicts involving young people from a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds. It is argued that racism permeates the lives of ethnic minority youth in ways which foster violence as a practical solution to problems of status and identity. However, inter-group violence of this sort also reinforces the stereotypes and social divisions upon which racial vilification and hate crime feed.

Keywords: hate crime; ethnic minority youth; racism; street conflict; violence

Introduction

The media construction of 'Otherness' has a major impact upon how young people see themselves, how they see their peers, and how they see themselves in relation to their peers. Media imagery certainly affects mainstream perceptions of the 'ethnic minority'. These images are neither neutral in social content nor with regard to institutional consequence (see, for example, Poynting *et al.* 2001). The negative portrayal of ethnic minority youth in the media is not, however, simply or solely due to misguided stereotyping and sensationalist reporting. There is a material basis for at least some of the public concerns expressed, albeit in distorted and partial form, through the mass media. This is especially so when it comes to certain types of street violence.

The intention of this paper is to discuss the nature of street fights involving ethnic minority youth, in order to explore the relationship between violence, racism and the phenomenon of hate crime. Our aim is to demonstrate how one particular paradox of marginalisation may well serve to fuel racist political attacks on ethnic minority groups in Australia, and how the actions of young people themselves contribute to this process. To put it simply, street-level violence involving acts of (perceived) hatred against another group (whether offensive or defensive), regardless of the fact that they may ultimately be seen to have been motivated by collective responses to racism and marginalisation, can have the consequence of reinforcing negative perceptions of ethnic minority youth. The street-level behaviour of ethnic minority

youth is thus liable to be used against them ideologically and symbolically, as refracted through various prisms of vilification and hate.

The substantive sections of the paper are based upon recent research carried out in Melbourne on so-called ethnic youth gangs (White *et al.* 1999; referred to hereafter as the Melbourne study). In our discussions with them, the young people spoke of two main types of group conflict. On the one hand, there was often reference to 'street fights'. These were seen as violent, occasionally involving weapons, and often linked to racism. Fighting occurred between different ethnic groups, as well as within particular communities. On the other hand, group conflict was also evident in the form of 'school fights'. These included verbal and physical assaults, and again were often associated with racism. In both cases, the young people tended to make assumptions and generalisations about other groups of young people from different ethnic backgrounds, including assumptions about Anglo-Australian young people.

The contribution of this paper is to explore the nature and reasons for these street conflicts. More specifically, it is to place these discussions within the context of resurgent interest in hate crime as a social phenomenon, and the potential consequences of street conflict, especially if perceived to be prejudice based, for wider political debates centring on the place of ethnic minorities in Australian society.

A Climate of Conflict

To appreciate the nature of street conflict between different groups of young people, it is important to emphasise the negative impact of the recent 'race' debate on the Australian social mosaic. In 1996, the populist right-wing candidate Pauline Hanson was elected as an independent member to federal parliament. Later to form her own political party (One Nation), Hanson's political agenda was founded upon racist ideologies (particularly in relation to indigenous people and 'Asians'), while also incorporating a range of nationalist (e.g. support for protectionism) and quasi-statist (e.g. more public assistance to farmers) perspectives. The rise of One Nation, and the implicit acceptance at a federal government level of many of Hanson's ideas and policy prescriptions (especially in areas such as immigration and resettlement policies, as well as indigenous concerns), has reopened public debate on 'race' issues in Australia in a particularly destructive way. They have allowed even the most crude and openly racist sentiments to be voiced without limit, and with considerable legitimacy. This new 'race' openness has been further bolstered by criticisms of so-called 'political correctness' by prominent political leaders, to the extent that to call a racist a racist is now considered taboo in many circles.

Recent work on 'hate crime' in Australia has pointed to the material result of such pronouncements and political movements (Cunneen *et al.* 1997). There has been increased reporting of racial vilification, many new stories of physical violence directed against the person and property of 'outsiders' (whether they be 'Asian', Aboriginal, gay and lesbian, Jewish, Arab, etc.), and the imposition of official crackdowns on particular communities alleged to be robbing the welfare system or engaging in criminal activity. It is a climate where 'difference' is being highlighted,

the 'Other' further entrenched with outsider status, and fear and loathing promoted as part of the mainstream of media and political debate. The seeds of social division, sown through years of economic disparity and institutionalised social discrimination, have re-emerged in the form of great fissures in the multicultural fabric (see White 1998). For many, the reality of life in contemporary Australia is shaped by what can only be described as a climate of hate.

The ramifications of such a climate on the people cohabiting what is one of the most polyethnic countries in the world, have still not been appreciated fully. For example, a number of assumptions are often made about the nature of 'hate crime' and violence directed against minorities. It is assumed, for instance, that the victims of such actions are always associated with minority groups. It is further assumed that the perpetrators are always drawn from the majority, particularly Anglo-Australian, communities. While there is plenty of evidence to support these contentions, especially in regard to the actions of the far right (Cunneen *et al.* 1997), there are complexities and paradoxes in the nature of social conflict that need to be further teased out. This is one aim of the present paper.

Hate crime is generally defined along the following lines:

A 'hate crime', synonymous with 'bias crime', is a prejudice-based criminal offence motivated by the victim's membership within a particular social group. This could include, but may not be limited to, crimes motivated by the victim's real or perceived race, ethnicity, national origin or sexual orientation. (Byers 1999: 47)

There is some dispute over how, or even if, this crime designation can adequately be operationalised in practice. In strict legal terms, two statute-based models of bias crime can be distinguished in the USA (see Lawrence 1999). The 'racial animus' model requires that the defendant has acted out of hatred for the victim's racial group or the victim for being a member of that group. The 'discriminatory selection' model requires that the defendant has selected their victim because of the victim's membership in a particular group. The common thread in these definitions is the 'state of mind' of the bias criminal.

However, in their critique of such statutes, Jacobs and Potter (1998) argue that it is extremely difficult to define a species of crime based upon prejudice or bigotry. The concept is a social construct, one that varies greatly in meaning depending upon whether a broad or a restrictive definition is used. They argue that hate crime is inherently ambiguous conceptually, and that it is terribly hard to demonstrate empirically—given that, in most cases, it is not possible to determine an offender's motivation. Choices invariably have to be made as to how to define the precise meaning of 'prejudice', and how to understand the nature of the causal link between the offender's prejudice and their criminal conduct.

There are also varying opinions on how to measure hate crime, and whether or not it is a growing problem. According to Lawrence (1999), for example, the extent of bias crime is essentially dependent upon a combination of objective quantification (e.g. crime reports, violence perpetrated by 'militias'), and changing perceptions (e.g. what was once seen as a 'prank' is now seen as bias-motivated vandalism).

Perception and problem are inextricably related. From this perspective, the spectre of hate crime looms as a very large, and very real, menace to (American) society. Alternatively, the size of the crime problem can be seen to be entirely dependent upon how the definition is manipulated. This is certainly the view of Jacobs and Potter (1998: 28) who argue, for instance, that 'If criminal conduct must be completely or pre-dominantly caused by prejudice in order to be termed hate crime, there will be few hate crimes. If prejudice need only in part to have motivated the crime, hate crime will be plentiful.' They critique the notion that there is a hate crime epidemic. In doing so, they note the lack of reliable, uniform data on hate crime.

The data that have been collected have, nevertheless, been used to develop a profile of the general characteristics of hate crime as such. British and US research, for example, indicates that the majority of hate crimes are committed by young white males, and that minority groups are generally at greater risk of victimisation, both in terms of household and personal offences (United States Bureau of Justice Statistics 1995; Fitzgerald & Hale 1996; Byers 1999). The attack is more likely to be committed by a stranger than a family member or acquaintance, and the perpetrators are half as likely to be under 20 years of age than over (United States Bureau of Justice Assistance 1997). The crime occurs not because of who the victim is, but rather because the victim is what they are (Lawrence 1999). In other words, group membership (or perceptions of such membership) becomes a prime reason for the violence experienced by the victim.

While 'race' appears to be an important predictor of victimisation, the elevated threat is not exclusively attributable to bias motivation; that is, loathing towards the group with which the victim identifies. In other words, there is no evidence to suggest a linear correlation between 'race' and bias-motivated victimisation. This is a significant observation, and is worth bearing in mind when interpreting the findings presented below. Having said this, however, it still needs to be acknowledged that both official and unofficial UK and US data suggest that 'race' is a key motivator of hate crime (Bowling 1993; Ehrlich 1989; United States Bureau of Justice Statistics 1995; Martin 1996).

Consistent with UK portrayals, information derived from the USA reveals a tendency for bias-motivated offences to fall predominantly within a handful of categories, namely: vandalism, assaults and threats (often accompanied by racist language). The effects of such attacks are profound. It has been argued, for instance, that hate crime introduces an additional dimension of harm compared with other types of criminal assault (Kelly 1993; for another view, see Jacobs & Potter 1998). The individualised pain and trauma that characteristically accompanies traditional forms of street crime is further transposed to the collective. Not only is the individual stigmatised on the basis of their social group membership, but, by logical extension, the social group is emotionally harmed. As Kelly (1993; cited in Byers 1999: 47) puts it:

The designation [of bias crime] is a signal that damage beyond the infliction of physical pain has been done. ... There is the hurt to victims

singled out for the most stigmatised aspects of their identities, and there is a collective emotional harm to entire groups who must live with the knowledge that they are vulnerable to random attack.

The collectivised nature of such crimes has a number of ramifications for group formation among minority youth. In particular, and as demonstrated in our study, the importance of group solidarity and mutual protection become paramount.

Also important to the present paper is the fact that hate crimes tend to be carried out by young males in a group setting. Furthermore, it has been pointed out that 'Young men who have been socialised to be aggressive and to find violent solutions to their problems may end their search for power by physically attacking others who, themselves, lack the power to retaliate' (Levin & McDevitt 1993: 71).

Taking these broad patterns into account, it is useful at this stage to distinguish between different types of hate crime. Differences in the motivation and character of these crimes are summarised in the accompanying typology (adapted from Levin and McDevitt; cited in Byers 1999).

Typology of Hate Crime

The Thrill Seeker

It is the anticipation of excitement and rush of adrenalin that motivates this class of perpetrator to engage in hate crime. Thrill-seeking hate crimes are customarily—though not exclusively—committed within a youth group context.

The Reactive Offender

The victimisation of a group is motivated by a sense of superiority. The underlying justification for violence lies in the belief that the offender is bestowed with certain 'rights' and 'privileges' not shared by the target group. Violence is therefore viewed as an attempt by the advantaged group to preserve their way of life and defend the rights and privileges which they perceive to be under threat from the 'Others' (e.g. jobs, school places, 'way of life').

The Mission Offender

The motivation for violence is unambiguously racist and/or based upon a political ideology. The violence is premeditated in the sense that it is usually linked to organised hate organisations or groups (e.g. National Action).

In our study of 'ethnic young gangs' we encountered many stories of street fights between diverse groups of young people (White *et al.* 1999). In many cases, racism was perceived to be the motivating trigger factor for the conflicts. What makes this form of violence different from that described in most of the literature on hate crime, however, is that very often the perpetrators, as well as victims, were from minority ethnic backgrounds.

We would suggest that the origins of these conflicts do bear a close relationship

to the nature of hate crime, in that they stem from biases and prejudices related to stereotypical views of the 'Other'. Furthermore, the violence generally involves groups of young men acting collectively, attacking other young people primarily on the basis of identification with a particular target group.

The problem with seeing these conflicts as 'hate crimes', however, is that it tends to transpose the explanation for the violence solely on to the perpetrators, without taking into account the structural location and social status of the parties involved. Such an approach not only may stigmatise ethnic minority youth who engage in street violence of this nature—as being 'racist', 'violent' and 'dangerous'—but it misses the essential point. That is, that racism permeates the lives of these young people in ways that manifest in both the stereotyping of other groups of young people, and that foster violence as a practical solution to problems of status insofar as it provides an immediacy and tangibility that is difficult to ignore or resist. As it stands, the inter-group violence depicted in our study appears to be more in keeping with the first category identified in the hate crime typology above, than the other categories. Even so, there is much more to the violence than simply that of 'thrill seeking' as such, and moreover, 'us' and 'them' demarcations certainly are central to the conflicts.

Constructing the 'Other'

Media images and treatments of ethnic minority young people in Australia are generally very negative. Researchers have commented on how these youth are often presented as being homeless, on drugs, members of gangs, school drop-outs and basically 'bad' and 'dangerous' (Pe-Pua 1996, 1999). The media are seen by young people themselves as a constant source of biased, sensationalist and inaccurate information about their lives and their communities (Maher *et al.* 1999; White *et al.* 1999). It is also frequently the case that particular events are seized upon by the media to reinforce the 'ethnic' character of deviancy and criminality in ways that stigmatise whole communities (Noble *et al.* 1999; Poynting 1999; Poynting *et al.* 2001; Collins *et al.* 2000).

Street Gangs

In the specific case of 'ethnic youth gangs', the activities and perceptions by and of ethnic minority youth present a special case. The over-riding message of most media reports, for example, is that such 'gangs' are entirely negative, dangerous and threatening. Indeed, in recent years the hype and sensationalised treatment of 'youth gangs' have tended increasingly to assume a racialised character (White 1996; see also Lyons 1995; Poynting *et al.* 2001). That is, the media have emphasised the 'racial' background of alleged gang members, and thereby fostered the perception that, for instance, 'young Lebanese' or 'young Vietnamese' equals 'gang member'. The extra 'visibility' of youth ethnic minority people (relative to the Anglo 'norm') feeds the media moral panic over 'youth gangs', as well as bolstering a racist stereotyping based upon physical appearance (and including such things as lan-

guage, clothes and skin colour). Whole communities of young people can be affected, regardless of the fact that most young people are not systematic law-breakers or particularly violent individuals. The result is an inordinate level of public and police suspicion and hostility being directed towards people from certain ethnic minority backgrounds.

With respect to these developments, it is significant that the increased frequency of involvement with the criminal justice system on the part of some ethnic minority young people, particularly in relation to drug offences and the use of violence (see, for example, Cain 1994; Gallagher & Poletti 1998), has led to heightened media attention of ethnic young people generally. However, the extent of the shifts in criminal justice involvement do not warrant the intensity and universalising tendencies apparent in much media coverage, which tend to provide negative images of ethnic minority people as a whole. The problems associated with police–ethnic minority youth relations have probably contributed to this as well, and forms an important part of the ‘image-building’ in relation to ethnic youth gangs.

Dedicated research and commentaries on gang formation in the Australian context have demonstrated that very often there is great ambiguity amongst both researchers and young people alike regarding the difference between ‘gangs’ and ‘groups’ (White *et al.* 1999; Collins *et al.* 2000; Perrone & White 2000). Such work has highlighted the wide variety of group formations amongst young people, and the diversity of activities in which young people engage. It is rare to find groups of teenagers who specifically gather together, over time and in an organised hierarchical network or structure, for the purposes of criminal activity. Rather, crime and anti-social activity tends to be irregular, sporadic and not the central purpose for hanging around together. Group formation itself, however, is frequently associated with types of group identification that periodically manifest in fights with other young people in a community.

Stereotypes, low social status and male aggressiveness were all ingredients in the reasons why young people from diverse ethnic backgrounds engaged in street violence. Often the violence was linked directly to ‘racial’ or ‘ethnic’ characteristics.

Street Violence: Group Fights

The study with which we were involved examined the issue of youth gangs by talking directly with young people about the nature of group formation and group activities in their communities and neighbourhoods (White *et al.* 1999). The study was based upon in-depth interviews with 120 young people from six different ethnic and cultural backgrounds across metropolitan Melbourne—including those from Vietnamese, Somalian, Turkish, Pacific Islander and Latin American backgrounds. Young people from Anglo-Australian backgrounds were also interviewed for the purposes of comparison. The young ethnic minority people in each sample were specifically targeted to reflect the dominant ethnic group in their particular region of the city. The sample included a cross-section of young people within the particular ethnic community, some of whom identified as being gang members (although, again, precise definitions were hard to establish even in these cases). Importantly,

Table 1 Young people's perceptions of the different groups that get involved in gang fights

Types of groups	Response to each category		
	Number (respondents)	Per cent (respondents)	Per cent (response)
Anglo against other ethnic	45	38.5	30.8
One ethnic against 'different' ethnic	37	31.6	25.3
Ethnic amongst 'similar' ethnic	9	7.7	6.2
Ethnic within ethnic	4	3.4	2.7
No particular/many different combinations	23	19.7	15.8
Another specific combination	3	2.6	2.1
Not based on ethnicity	13	11.1	8.9
Don't know	11	9.4	7.5
Other	1	0.9	0.7
Total	146		100.0

$N = 117$.

Missing responses = 3 (2.5%).

the interviews were carried out with young people who are often difficult to access or who are rarely consulted about such matters.

A major focus of the research was to investigate the specific problems, challenges and opportunities faced by ethnic minority young people. The ethnic minority young people we interviewed spoke about the difficulties of migration, of leaving familiar homes and cultures, to settle in a new, often quite alien, environment. Differences in language, religion and community values were frequently associated with problems in the resettlement process, and finding a place within Australian social life. Most of the young people lived in low-income households, in low-income areas. Unemployment was a significant problem for both the young people and quite often their parents. Basically the sample comprised young people from working-class neighbourhoods who were economically marginalised, and who were socially and culturally on the margins of mainstream Australian society.

The study found that street fighting, and school-based fights, were a fairly common occurrence. The young people were asked about which groups get involved in conflicts with other groups, and why this was so. Table 1 presents data on the perceptions of the young people of the different groups that get involved in gang fights (White *et al.* 1999).

The reasons for the fights between different groups of young people are in one sense already suggested by the findings presented in Table 1. That is, there appears to be a strong link between ethnicity and group behaviour involving street and school-based conflicts. Table 2 presents another perspective on why fights of this nature happen.

The specific reasons for fighting between different groups are identified as being due to perceptions regarding what are acceptable or unacceptable ways to relate to particular groups and individuals. Racism and treating people with disrespect are crucial elements in the explanation. So too is the sense of ownership and belonging

Table 2 Young people's perceptions of why gang fights happen

Types of groups	Response to each category		
	Number (respondents)	Per cent (respondents)	Per cent (response)
Acting/talking smart	26	29.5	22.6
Drugs	7	8.0	6.1
Power struggles/revenge/territory	31	35.2	27.0
Girls	5	5.7	4.3
Don't know	5	5.7	4.3
Other	9	10.2	7.8
Total	115		100.0

$N = 88$.

Missing responses = 32 (26.7%).

associated with particular local areas and membership of particular youth groups. Social status is thus something that is both contested and defended, and this in turn is generally tied to one's identification with certain people and places.

Different Experiences and Perceptions of Street Conflicts

Dimensions of Racism: Pacific Islander Youth

While overall commonalities were apparent in how the young people perceived the issues, specific differences emerged as well, depending upon the group in question. Each group of young people we talked to thus had different experiences and perceptions regarding group formation, gang membership and gang-related behaviour. A particularly insightful discussion was held with members of the Pacific Islander communities. These respondents were asked about the types of illegal activities young people might engage in, but not for the purposes of money. The leading response was 'fighting/assaults', followed by 'drug/alcohol use' and 'car theft/joy riding'.

The main reasons given for engagement in these kinds of activities were fun and excitement, showing off, peer pressure, boredom, problems at home and revenge against other young people. The intensity of feeling associated with fights in particular is indicated in the following quotations:

PI19: People might feel angry and go out and beat the shit out of somebody, go out and go and you know, like just little things people consider crimes, like going out and getting pissed at the beach, or you know, or smoking drugs, or doing drugs, or—but that's not, is that a crime? Do you think that's a crime?—um stealing cars, just go for a ride. You know, you feel like going for a ride somewhere, so just walk down the street and get someone's car, steal taxis.

PI20: The teenagers, that's what they get up to [fighting/assaults]. Like the

Maoris, especially the Maoris. That's why we've got a really bad name down here. They love beating up the white people, because you know, they can't get to them. Even at school, that's what they do—for fun.

Violence directed against oneself, against property and against others indicates a high level of frustration and alienation. They are also usually linked to what was described as typical youth gang behaviour—in this case, describing groups of young men who acted tough.

The Pacific Islander young people were asked specifically if racism was a reason for belonging to a gang. The issue of racism had a number of different dimensions. In some cases, gang membership was perceived to be a response to *direct threats* to particular groups of young people:

PI6: Maoris stick together no matter what, because they've all been through a lot of racism in schools and elsewhere. They get called 'black cunt' and 'sheep fucker.' I've had rocks thrown at me at school and everything because of racism. Most Aussies reckon that Maoris, Samoans and Tongans are all the same; when you try to explain it, they just go 'what?'

PI7: It could be part of the reason why. Coming to a country like Australia is—I find it a very racist place. Australians are very racist from what I've seen. They've got names for everyone. I didn't know what a 'wog' was before I came here. They put everyone into different categories—you've got your 'wogs' and you've got your 'nips' and you've got your 'skips.' They don't know respect; a lot of kids seem to not know the word respect.

PI2: They [different gangs] like to fight each other. Australians always fight people from other races.

Another feature of the discussion over racism was the way in which ethnicity came to the fore, not simply as a response to a perceived or actual threat, but as a form of *confirmation of group identity*:

PI11: You ask me why do I become a certain part of a group or a gang. That group or gang's basically my network of friends and family. If you looked at your life, you've got a network of family and then friends and you're in that circle; basically you see 'em like that—you could class that as a gang. Why do people do it? only because people only associate with certain different people. There are all these other mates on the outside of the circle, they [gang members] spend more time with the people in the immediate circle.

PI19: They usually have the same focus. If you wanna know why Maoris are in gangs, I'll tell you right now. It's because we are tribal people. We've been like tribal people for like thousands of years right, and we, because we group together because that's what tribal people do, right. And because these children that are born here—like the ones that you've been speaking

to—they think you know, they identify with culture from America right, because they think: ‘Oh well, I’m black,’ you know, ‘I wanna be cool.’ They don’t know who they are; they’re lost. They need their identity.

In some cases, however, racism was seen more as a *convenient cover for aggressive action* on the part of some group members. In other words, the anti-social or violent behaviour was justified on the basis of racism, but the primary motivation was not seen to reside in racism per se:

PI4: With some nationalities racism can be a reason. But sometimes I feel that certain Maoris and Samoans or Polynesians, they like to use the word ‘racism’ as an excuse and they give somebody a thump and like the police say ‘why did you do that?’ and they say ‘well, he called me a black such and such.’ I think sometimes people just use that as an excuse and they don’t really know what racism is.

PI20: I don’t like the Maoris down here to be honest, even though I’m a Polynesian myself. But they just really, really think that they can boss around the Australians and all that; you know, the white people. And to me, oh, I just get really, really offended, ‘cos I know I’m black, but I’m an Australian but, and I hate it when people do that; it really puts you off. But they wanna be, you know, the number one people here in Frankston.

Street fights featured prominently in discussions about the activities of gangs. Aggression between groups was generally seen to be linked to racism or power struggles over territory. Other reasons for the fighting included taking action ‘over a woman’, some people being perceived as acting or talking smart, drug-related aggressiveness, or simply some young people just wanting to act tough for the sake of it.

From the point of view of the Pacific Islander youth, when it comes to street fights between groups, rather than simply between individuals or small numbers of young people, there was a strong ‘ethnic’ dimension. This is reflected in the following quotations:

PI4: I find that a lot of Australians, not all Australians, but a lot of Australians, are pretty racist towards Oriental people—Vietnamese, Chinese. I’ve asked a lot of Australians ‘why would you want to be racist against the Vietnamese?’ and they always say something like ‘they’re always pulling out machetes’ and stuff like that and ‘they’ll chop you up’ and stuff like that. They say ‘They should go back to their own country and chop each other up instead of coming over here and chopping us up.’ I can’t see a normal person who’s sober say a racist remark to a Polynesian. I mean if a Polynesian and a Vietnamese were sitting together and there was an Australian guy, I believe that he’d say something racist to the Vietnamese, rather than the Polynesian. Australians think if they say something racist towards a Vietnamese they necessarily won’t do nothing, because they’re

smaller—they come in small sizes. That’s why they’ll pick on a Vietnamese rather than a Polynesian first.

PI9: Asians against Australians I’d say. Australians are very racist against the Asian groups.

PI13: A few years ago it was Maoris and Australians used to fight each other all the time. But not now; not any more. Vietnamese usually fight against the Cambodians and the Australians [now].

PI15: It’s mainly, everyone’s onto the Asians. Everyone hates Asians. Doesn’t matter which gang, you know, everyone hates them.

PI17: The Maoris most; [They fight] anybody.

PI18: It used to be Aussies versus the Maoris, but it’s not as common any more. There aren’t any skinheads around here, there are too many Maoris. There are some Vietnamese, but not enough to make one gang. You need about one hundred to make one gang.

Ethnicity was a major source of social connection for most of the people in the study. There was a familiarity with one another, and a sense of shared experiences. However, the group nature of youth behaviour also manifests itself in the form of fights on the street, and conflicts between groups and individuals within the school setting. In this context, it is understandable that the young people saw gang formation and membership as a rational way to protect oneself.

The process of group formation is linked in several ways to racism. For instance, racist violence directed at certain groups, whether on the street or in the school, by other young people or by state police, can be a trigger for collective responses to the threat. Similarly, gang membership can also, simultaneously, be an important way in which to confirm one’s group identity, to determine precisely whom one is and where they fit into the wider world. It also needs to be acknowledged that periodically the notion of racism can be used as a convenient cover for the aggression of the victimised group. In other words, it can be used to justify violence that is substantially motivated by a desire to engage in the violence itself, rather than in responding to racism per se. Angry young men lashing out at the world around them is a quite different phenomenon to concerted community action that attempts to foster an anti-racist social environment.

Racism and Class: Turkish Youth

The young Turkish people in the study were also asked whether or not racism had anything to do with gang formation or gang-related behaviour. Their answers varied. Some argued that racism, or at the least *ethnic identification*, is a major reason for gang membership:

T2: Because ‘Turks’ stick with ‘Turks’ and ‘Lebos’ stick with ‘Lebos’ and the Asians with the Asians. Because, it’s like if you need some help, you can

go to one of the gang members and get all of the group to come and help you with your situation.

T4: A lot of for example ‘wogs’ don’t like ‘Aussies’ or ‘Nips’, so it’s like you’ve got something against them, but you don’t even know why—just because they’re different.

T6: I suppose they all can’t get along; Turkish can’t mix with Australians and I don’t know, they just want to see who’s tougher.

T14: Mainly Turkish—they’re just in their packs out and about.

T14: Racism could start in the playground at school—getting picked on by some other group and then running to the safety of a majority group.

Other young people placed more stress on *immediate local conditions* and other forms of social connection (such as being unemployed, or drug users) as being the main reason for certain types of gang formation:

T9: Living in Broadmeadows and leaving school in year 10, it doesn’t leave you much to do really.

T19: Mostly the people that are in the gangs are the druggies of the area; they all like to smoke together.

T10: They’re mostly friends, dropouts from the same schools who come together and do things together.

T18: Kids in areas where unemployment levels are much higher than other suburbs; you know, hooligans hanging around the streets.

Still others had the perception that regardless of present social circumstances, the issue of *racism was no longer dominant* in terms of how groups of young people relate to each other, or as the basis for specific group formations:

T18: I wouldn’t say racism, because I haven’t seen racism for years. Like, Broadmeadows years ago used to be full of racism, like ‘What are you doing “wog”’ down the street, but not any more.

T8: There used to be [gangs in the area] but not any more. Back in those days there used to be racism. When people like Turkish people, Lebanese or anyone that used to come from overseas, they used to get called like ‘wogs’ by Australians or the Asians were called ‘Nippers’ and they’d argue about it and they’ll go into a gang to fight ‘em and make sure they’d protect one another.

Ignorance and Stereotype: Latin American Youth

The Latin American youth we spoke with were asked whether or not there were ethnic differences in how different young people used their time. Differences were identified, based upon religious and cultural backgrounds, choice in recreational

activity, and time spent with one's family. However, significantly, many of the young people were hard pressed to actually identify of what the specific differences in activity might consist—owing to a lack of knowledge about other groups of young people. This is indicated in the following comments:

LA3: People from Asia do different things than we [Latin Americans] do. I really don't know, but I would think that they do different things. I don't know, I don't really have friends from different backgrounds, so I don't really know.

LA8: I don't know what other people from different backgrounds do, but I believe it's different.

LA9: I think there's a difference in what they do, but I don't know what's different. You know, we never get together with other ethnic groups, so I don't know.

LA11: Not really, maybe a bit. I don't know. If you're ... like say Italian ... you're probably lucky. You probably have a lot of spaghetti or lasagne.

LA12: No not really. I just think that like, if you're like with all Spanish people, you do different things. You would like listen to your own kind of like music from where you come from, like Spanish music.

The young people were asked about the difference between a group and a gang. As with the academic literature on gangs, there was some confusion and uncertainty over what demarcated a gang or not. In discussion, however, when asked about what types of gangs were present in their particular neighbourhoods, the young people emphasised 'ethnicity' more than age or criminality. This perception of gangs is particularly interesting given the Latin American young people's general lack of knowledge about other ethnic young people, as discussed above.

The perception that other groups of ethnic minority youth, or Anglo-Australian youth, constitute 'gangs', simply by virtue of their ethnic background, is clearly conveyed in the following quotations. In some cases the ignorance regarding the affairs of other young people is manifest in the use of racist descriptions of them:

LA4: Yeah, there are heaps. Well, there's the Vietnamese group, also the drugs—drug dealers. Well, I seen some Africans too; I don't really know if they're gangs or not—the Latinos.

LA5: Aborigines, Australians, Albanians and the 'Wogs'.

LA8: There are many gangs in my local area. Well, most of them are Vietnamese—from an Asian background. There's lots of 'em from Africa—Somalia.

LA11: I've only been here three weeks. I haven't seen any of them. But in my old local area, there were packs. There's the 'Gooks'—that's what everyone else calls 'em. And there's 'Skips in Control'—which they think.

There's the 'Wogs' and there's the 'Niggers' and there's the South Americans, which are called 'Latins'.

When specific detail about 'gangs' was sought, many of the young people were unsure about things such as the size of such groups. The names of local 'gangs' either referred to a specific geographical location (e.g. the 3174 gang, based upon the post code for Noble Park) or ethnic background (e.g. the 'Skips in Control' gang). Largely, however, gang membership was perceived to consist of particular kinds of ethnic identification, which was reinforced by the concentration of certain groups of young people in certain suburbs.

The comments on gang fights offer intriguing insights into the nature and dynamics of such activity:

LA3: You can't generalise that one group fights with another. You know, Latin Americans like fighting and they fight against anyone, it doesn't really matter. For example, with the Latin Americans you know, they have two different gangs or groups you know—[one] from one country and [the other] from another country of Latin America and you know, there's always fighting between countries from Latin America because they have different beliefs, so they fight about practically everything from you know, drinking, to what do you think or how do you speak Spanish—'Do you speak better than me?'. But Latin Americans usually prefer to fight between each other, but for example, if they have a fight against another group—the Australians or the Vietnamese or any other race—they unite. For example, the gang from El Salvadorians or the Chilean gangs or whichever gang, they get together and both of them fight against the other gang.

LA4: Well, around here is mainly the Asians against the Asians.

LA8: The Asians get involved in gang fights, especially the Vietnamese in Springvale. You see some of the El Salvadorians getting involved in that, but the Vietnamese are the main ones in Springvale.

LA12: It's usually like Asians versus like Australians.

LA13: I would say at the moment, Australians against Asian people.

LA15: From what I know, it's mostly Lebanese, Turkish, Asians.

LA16: Well around this area, I suppose you hear a lot of trouble between like Turkish and like other countries around that area and Asians against Australians as well.

Fights of this nature were predominantly attributed to 'racism'. As indicated earlier, there appear to be strong ethnic identifications and distinctions amongst the various street-present young people. In addition to tensions between these groups, and within particular communities, there is the additional factor of a volatile social climate engendered by the rise to prominence of the One Nation Party:

LA13: Because of, you know, the racial hatred that there is at the moment in Australia. The Asians are hated by Pauline Hanson and then by every body else. Not every body else, but a lot of people do support her opinions. And in numbers, you'd be surprised how many people do think, do agree with Pauline in Australia, but they're just silent because they fear that you know, the people might think badly of them.

Another young person commented that a large part of the problem is ignorance: 'Because they don't like understand their cultures—like the other groups' cultures—and like the story behind their lives'(LA17). The lack of appreciation of other young people's backgrounds, histories and cultures thus is seen to contribute to at least some of the tension between the diverse groups.

Street Conflict, Racism and Hate Crime

Street violence of various kinds features strongly in the lives of the young people, especially the young men with whom we spoke during the course of the Melbourne study. In and of itself, this is fairly unremarkable given the prevalence of certain types of aggressive physicality within marginalised and working-class communities. Being tough and engaging in acts that put one's bodily integrity at risk are generally associated with working-class male culture (in its many varieties and permutations). Typically, the matters of physique and the physical have been central to working-class forms of aggressive masculinity that celebrate strength, speed, agility and general physical prowess (White 1997/8). Under conditions of economic disadvantage, social stress and group marginalisation, there is even greater recourse to 'the body' as a key site for identity construction and affirmation (see Connell 1995, 2000). Thus, a lack of institutional power and accredited social status appears to leave little alternative to physicality itself as the main form of self-definition, whether this manifests itself as self-destructive behaviour or as violence directed at the other.

We would argue that the material basis for this violence lies in the disadvantages and injuries of social inequality. Social polarisation is the breeding ground for interpersonal violence. The links between economic marginalisation, working-class culture and particular forms of masculinity (reflective of certain hegemonic masculine ideals) have been discussed at length elsewhere (see Segal 1990; Connell 2000). So, too, recent work has provided sophisticated analysis of the ways in which ethnicity, racism and masculinity combine to reinforce particular kinds of behaviour and group formation (Collins *et al.* 2000). In regard to issues surrounding ethnicity specifically, Collins *et al.* (2000: 143) argue that violence and aggression have more to do with questions of status and masculinity than with inter-ethnic conflict. We would broadly agree with this observation. Yet we wish to emphasise, nevertheless, the importance of such conflicts in constructing images of, and social responses to, ethnic minority young men.

The public images of ethnic minority youth are shaped by racialised media portrayals (see, for example, Poynting *et al.* 2001; Collins *et al.* 2000; White *et al.*

1999), and by the manner in which police intervene in their lives (White 1996; Perrone & White 1999; Collins *et al.* 2000). They are also influenced by actual incidents of violence, such as fights and bullying, between groups of young people on the street. Institutionalised racism (in the form of restrictive life chances and the dominance of monocultural norms), economic marginalisation (in the form of unemployment and poverty) and reliance upon particular notions of masculinity (in the form of reliance on physical and symbolic markers of toughness) put these young people into a particularly vulnerable and volatile social situation. This, in turn, is associated with a central paradox in the lives of ethnic minority youth. Specifically, the assertion of identity and collective social power via membership of street groups and engagement in fighting, while forged in the context of rejecting racism and threats from outsiders, simultaneously reinforces the subordinate or 'outsider' position of, and negative social reaction directed toward, these selfsame groups of young people.

This paradox of marginalisation can be explored further by once again referring to the literature on hate crime. As discussed previously, hate crime is typically explained in terms of the social circumstances of the perpetrator (e.g. disadvantaged background, reliance on violent solutions to perceived social problems) and situational dynamics relating to the fact that it is associated primarily with young men, acting in groups. In our work, we were struck by how discussions of the motivations and character of hate crime seemed to fit the behaviour and actions of ethnic minority youth. For instance, some Maori young people conveyed the sentiment that they do indeed find excitement and thrills in attacking non-Maori people—it was 'fun' to do, and 'racism' was only a veneer used to justify having a punch-up. For others, fighting was clearly linked to issues of safety and protection, as well as garnering respect from those outside the particular community or group. In this sense, violence was certainly reactive, not so much to preserve perceived advantage (as in some types of hate crime), but to defend oneself against threats. We found no evidence among the young people of violence being based upon a racist or political ideology as such.

Clear lines of group demarcation were constantly drawn throughout the Melbourne research. While membership of any particular group may have been variable (e.g. Laotians and an Anglo-Australian being part of the 'Vietnamese' youth formation), there were broad-brush categorisations used to distinguish 'Australians', 'Asians', 'Turkish', 'Latinos' and so on. People know who the 'wogs' are (with considerable internal variations in terms of precision and categorisation), and who the 'Aussies' are (with very few qualifications or recognition of internal categorical differences). These social distinctions have very real and pertinent effects at a political level. The history of immigration settlement and the particular ways in which 'multiculturalism' has been propagated at an ideological and policy level have undoubtedly contributed to the maintenance of these 'commonsense' divisions (see, for example, Jakubowicz 1989; Jamrozik *et al.* 1995; Vasta & Castles 1996). That is, the institutionalisation of 'difference', in ways that embed social inequalities across and within groups, is a reflection of broad political and economic processes fostered by the Australian state over time. Our present concern, however, is less with the

structural underpinning of social difference than with the impacts that this has at an interpersonal and immediate political level.

The institutional racism and economic marginalisation experienced by the ethnic minority young people in the Melbourne study is linked directly to group formations that function in particular ways to sustain a sense of identity, community, solidarity and protection. The assertion of identity, and the 'valorisation of respect in the face of marginalisation' (Collins *et al.* 2000: 150), manifests itself in the form of group membership and group behaviour that privileges loyalty and being tough (individually and as a member of the identified group) in the face of real and perceived outside threats. It also sometimes takes the form of contempt for 'Aussies' (as the dominant social group) and wariness of other ethnic minority groups that likewise are struggling to garner respect and reputation in a hostile environment.

Street violence that is premised ostensibly upon 'hatred' for other groups, regardless of the material circumstances that provide the social context for such actions, rebounds back upon the group in question in unexpected and unintended ways. Fundamentally, we would argue that in a political environment in which 'race politics' is a predominant feature (witness the recent controversies over asylum seekers, and the anti-immigration electoral platform of the One Nation Party), the spectre of 'ethnic criminality' is effectively bolstered by the actions of ethnic minority youth themselves, as they struggle to negotiate their masculinities, ethnicities and class situations. This is dangerous politically. For to the extent that racism is seen and/or portrayed in strictly attitudinal terms, then the manifest activities of ethnic minority youth can be distorted and sensationalised in ways that portray them as racist, 'un-Australian' and socially divisive. The association of street fights with 'racist' attitudes can be used to assert that the victims of systemic social discrimination are in fact the main perpetrators of hate crimes (defined narrowly as prejudice-based offences). An inversion of real relations and social processes is thus made possible. This presents the far right with a potential field day politically, while creating major difficulties for governments and authority figures (such as the police) to find remedies to the street conflicts that do not further reinforce the racialisation and criminalisation of such conflicts, and the people involved in them.

It is interesting in this regard to note the feedback from the Anglo-Australian young people interviewed for the Melbourne study. According to many of these respondents, the ethnic basis for group membership was also seen as evidence of 'racism' (in a sense) insofar as young people from similar cultural and ethnic backgrounds were seen to be consciously excluding themselves from the dominant Anglo-Australian society. Racism was thus also construed to mean the close group identification of young people from similar ethnic, national and cultural backgrounds, in ways that affirmed the young person's membership of one section of society (but, in the eyes of the respondents, not another). Ethnic identification was thus conflated with the idea of 'racism'. That is, group formation based upon mutual understanding and shared experiences was seen actively to exclude and include people on the basis of 'race' or 'ethnicity'. From the perspective of the dominant group—the Anglo-Australian young people—this was seen as a problem, even

though the processes of exclusion, and emphases on 'difference', from the dominant group constitute major reasons for this social phenomenon.

Conclusion

Superficially, some of the stories of street conflict provided by the young people in our study appear to approximate the usual definitions of hate crime. However, given the social location and status of the young people involved, finer analytical distinctions need to be drawn. For example, we would suggest that the nature of the inter-group conflict, while in some senses 'race-based' or 'ethnicity-based', is not necessarily 'race-motivated'. That is, the basis of the violence and conflict is not due to intrinsic biases against a particular group, or to discriminatory selection of victims or other young people to fight. Who fights whom is historically, socially and situationally contingent. It depends upon local dynamics, the particularities of immediate neighbourhood and school relationships, and who the newly arrived group is (i.e. the newest 'outsider').

We would argue that making sense of the street conflicts involving different ethnic minority youth requires an appreciation of the material resources available—or, more precisely, not available—to these young people. We would also make the point that the recent concerted undermining of the legitimacy of 'multiculturalism' as a state ideology and policy framework has had, and will continue to have, a major impact on the identification, confidence and opportunities available to ethnic minority youth. In many cases, this will lead to hybrid identity formation, in which young people claim different 'identities' depending upon social circumstance (see Noble *et al.* 1999). However, in cases where physical differences are pronounced relative to the white, Anglo-Australian 'norm', the impact of the 'race' debate and associated policy revisions will be much greater, and much more difficult to negotiate.

While racism is certainly implicated in the nature of street violence, both via institutional structures that marginalise many ethnic minority young people and through direct face-to-face confrontations, the crucial variable is that of power. Fights between groups of relatively powerless sections of the community is less a matter of 'hate crime' per se than that of social dislocation and marginality. However, this type of violence does tend to reinforce the stereotypes and social divisions upon which racial vilification and hate crime feeds. The perpetrators of violence against one group may thus find themselves branded and ostracised from the mainstream, precisely because they engage in the sorts of activities they do. It may thus confirm the media image—that ethnic minority youth are violent, dangerous and not to be trusted. And it is this image that constitutes a major political resource for the purveyors of race hate in contemporary Australian society.

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