

An Analysis of Gang Violence --- a Subcultural Perspective

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I Introduction

This paper describes the influences of gang subculture on gang violence through a research in the youth gangs conducted in Tai Po District in Hong Kong from October 1995 to March 1996 under the subcultural perspective. The objectives of the research include (a) to understand the typologies of gang violence regarding their ratio and level of violence employed; (b) to understand the influences of gang subculture on the exhibition of gang violence; and (c) to understand the process of exhibition of gang violence including the factors considered and the criteria for making the final decisions to use violence by the group members. The researched targets were those youth groups which had at least three members, aged from 6 to 24, exhibited stable gathering pattern, always wandered in the streets, exhibited behaviours such as shouting, smoking, gambling and speaking foul languages, caused disturbances to neighbours, sometimes would exhibit deviant behaviours such as fighting, stealing and taking drugs and had direct and indirect linkage with the Triad. Finally, five groups of the Tai Po Outreaching Team participated in the research. The research methods employed including non-participant observation, individual in-depth interview and focus group discussion. Totally 32 in-depth interviews were conducted with the group members, responsible social workers of the groups, teachers and the police officer of that District. The conceptual framework of the research of the study is delineated in Section II.

II Conceptual Framework

With reference to Kroeber & Kluckhohn (1962) and Brake (1980), the analysis of group subculture includes the analysis of the group value system, group norms and group structure. Thus, all three dimensions will be included in the analysis of the relationship between gang subculture and gang violent behaviours in this paper.

Group value system: According to Parsons and Shils et al. (1949), there are three types of value orientations: the cognitive mode of value orientation, moral mode of orientation and appreciation mode of value-orientation. With reference to the data obtained from the study, the first type of value orientation of Parsons and Shils et al. (1949) is re-defined as 'environmental-oriented value orientation' which denotes the making of decision whether to employ violence is depending on the actual power differentials between the parties. The second mode of value orientation is re-defined as 'resolute-oriented' value orientation which denotes the making of decision according to other higher appeals other than the environment. Since the researched groups had not expressed the third mode of value orientation of Parsons and Shils et al., it will not be used in the analysis.

Group norms: Group norms are maintained through formal and informal sanctions on members (Wolfgang & Ferracuti, 1982). The analysis of group norms in this study includes (a) the analysis of the contents of group norms on employing violence, (b) the analysis of strength of group norms through the analysis of the sanctions on the members and (c) to analyse whether the group norms in different subcultural groups have derived collective evaluation, collective expectation and collective reaction on employing violence.

Group structure: It includes the analysis of the gathering pattern and power structure of the groups. The prior one delineates the frequency, duration and contents of the group gatherings while the later one depicts on whether the group has a vertical or horizontal power structure.

Group values, group norms and group structure may not directly influence the exhibition of group violence. Some intermediate factors may exist affecting the frequency and level of group violence. The conceptual framework of this study is delineated in Figure 1. Section III will describe the four typologies of violence derived through the data obtained from non-participant observation, interviews and focus group discussions of the five researched groups.

III The Typologies of Gang Violence in Tai Po District

The typologies of the violence pattern are derived regarding to the ratio and the level of violence exhibited. The ratio of violence is calculated on the ratio of violence used when the researched groups are in the situations of being provoked or can provoke the other gangs. The gangs that employ violence in at least 50% in the situations mentioned above are regarded as having high ratio of violence. The gangs responded in violence in less than 50% situations are regarded as having low ratio of violence. The seriousness of violence is defined according to the indicator of stop using violence, the scale of participation and whether weapons are used or not. The gangs which stop using violence when the rivalry parties are badly hurt or have obvious bruises, participate in using violence by large percentage of group members and use weapons are regarded as employing high level of violence. The groups which stop using violence when the rivalry parties do not have obvious bruise, only individual or small percentage of members participate in the events and do not use weapons are regarded as employing low level of violence.

According to the research findings, four typologies are derived on the violence pattern of the five researched groups based on the above-mentioned ratio and seriousness of violence employed. They are the 'High-High' type, the 'High-Low' type, the 'Low-High' type and the 'Low-Low' type.

'High-High' type: Group 3 and Group 5 belonged to this type. They exhibited violence in all occasions when being provoked by other parties. The group would fight with the other parties without hesitation when they found that the names of their Triads were being insulted. Usually, the whole group would participate in the violent events. They

would use weapons such as metal rod to fight and would stop only when the rival parties or themselves were badly hurt or had obvious wound or bleeding.

‘High-Low’ type: Group 1 belonged to this type. The group members exhibited violence in 71% of the situations when they were provoked or had the opportunities to provoke the other parties. They only would employ violence in the situations that were favourable to them such as when they were outnumbered or had stronger physical built-up than the other parties. Also, only few members would involve in the violent events. The group members would only use mild violence to tease other parties or obtained some material benefits. They would also stop using violence when they or the other parties had minor external wounds.

‘Low-High’ type: Group 2 belonged to this type. It exhibited violence in 37.5% of the situations when they were being provoked or had the opportunities to provoke the other parties. They would only exhibit violence when they were more powerful than the other parties apparently. Also, most of the group members would participate in the violent events. They would use weapons to increase their fighting abilities and would stop when the opposite parties were severely hurt.

‘Low-Low’ type: Group 4 belonged to this type. It exhibited violence in only 12.5% of the situations when it was being provoked. Also, only very few members would participate in violent events. Only two members had involved in using violence once during the research period. They did not use weapons and would stop when the opposite party had minor bruise.

The characteristics of the four typologies of gang violence of the five groups are delineated in Table 1. This study also revealed that different subcultures were associated with different exhibition of violence-using patterns by different groups. The following section will depict on the different types of subculture of the researched groups while Section V will discuss on the influences of gang subculture on the exhibition of gang violence pattern.

IV Types of Subculture

According to the research data, the five researched groups (Group 1 to Group 5) can be categorized into four types of subcultures, namely the ‘Triad subculture’, ‘Friendship Subculture’, ‘Semi-Triad Subculture’ and the ‘Recreational Subculture’. They have different group values, group norms and group structure. The group norms studied in this research include the formal and informal ways of sanctioning group members and the collective evaluation, expectation and responses on using violence. The dimensions of group structure studied in this analysis include the gathering pattern and the power structure of the subculture.

Group values:

Group values relating to the use of violence revealed by interviewees in this study include ‘using violence as problem-solving means’, ‘offering help to friends in need’,

‘taking revenge after losing the battle’, ‘protecting your face’, ‘taking the challenges when it comes’, ‘no need to be frightened due to the strong support behind’ and ‘raising your status by fighting’.

The groups of Triad Subculture (Group 3 and Group 5) favoured the seven values mentioned above. Group members tended to use violence to solve problems, to help their friends and to protect their face. They also inclined to take revenge after losing the fighting battle with the rivalry groups. To conclude, they had very positive attitude in using violence when facing challenge. They expressed the ‘resolute-oriented’ value orientation in using violence.

The group of Friendship Subculture (Group1) only presented mild tendency to use violence. Group members tended to use group violence to solve problems and protect face but their determination on whether to help friends in need or whether to response to challenge with violence depended on the actual situations. They would only respond with violence when they seemed more powerful than the rivalry parties apparently. On the other hand, the group members did not have the concepts of taking revenge after losing the battle, to raise the reputation by exhibiting violence and to act without fear because of the strong support behind. In short, this kind of subcultural group presented the ‘environmental-oriented’ value orientation in using violence.

The group of Semi-Triad Subculture (Group 2) exhibited a rather high tendency in using violence. The group members agreed to take violence as problem-solving mean. However, they would also consider the actual situations when determining whether to offer helps to friends in needs through using violence and respond to challenge with violence. However, some members of this subculture had the concepts of taking revenge after losing the battle and would act without fear due to the strong support behind. Anyway, the members did not have the concept of using violence as a means to raise their reputation in the group. To conclude, this subcultural group also adopted the ‘environmental-oriented’ value orientation in using violence.

The group categorized as Recreational Subculture (G4) had low intention to use violence. Few members of this subcultural group had the value of using violence as problem-solving means. They also would consider the actual situations when determining whether to offer help to friends in need and to respond to challenge with violence. However, the members did not have the concepts of taking revenge, protecting face, raising reputation through using violence and act without fear because of the strong support behind. To conclude, the group of the Recreational Subculture also exhibited a ‘Resolute-Oriented’ value orientation but opposite to the Triad Subculture which showing resolution in using violence, they were resolute in avoiding using violence. The characteristics of the values of different subcultures are delineated in Table 2

Group norms:

The groups of the Triad subculture had collective evaluation, expectations and responses on using of violence. They regarded it as ‘unavoidable’ mean to give lessons to those who showed disrespect to them and their Triads. In the Triad culture, to protect the

reputation of the Triad was regarded as a duty of the members. It had formal and informal sanctions to members violating this group norm. Thus, the whole group would participate in fighting against the opposite parties in that case.

It was also revealed in this study that the Friendship Subculture and the Semi-Triad Subculture did not have formal sanction on the group members on their behaviours and they also did not have collective evaluation and expectations on using violence. Therefore, the group members did not have collective responses when facing challenges. They were free to choose to participate in the events or not.

The Recreational Subculture did not have any sanction on the behaviours of the members. It also had negative evaluation on using violence. Their collective expectation on using violence was to avoid using it as far as possible. The characteristics in group norms of different subcultures are delineated in Table 3.

Group Structure

All the five groups of the four subcultures had more or less the same gathering pattern. The group members met about five to seven days a week and about 2 to five hours per day. Nevertheless, their power structures were not the same. The Triad Subculture had the vertical power structure which the group leaders had the power to control the behaviours of the members. The group members had to fight according to the instructions of the leader. On the other hand, the other three types of subcultures were having the horizontal power structure. The group members were free to behave according to their own will. They could choose whether to participate in the fighting events when they happened. They are delineated in Table 4.

The group values, group norms and group structures facilitate certain response pattern of different subcultural groups. The next section will describe the influences of these dimensions on group violence pattern.

V The Influences of Group Subcultures on Violence Exhibition

The violence-using patterns are response patterns of different subcultural groups when being provoked by or have the opportunities of provoking the other parties. Research data reveals that group subcultures might influence how the members evaluate the environments they were situated and the response patterns of the members through affecting their (a) definition of the nature of conflicts, (b) assessment of their mobilizing power on their groups and (c) the assessment of powers of their own groups. The response patterns of the different subculture groups can be classified into three types: 'Fighting Style', 'Opportunity Style' and 'Avoidance Style'.

The group members of Triad Subculture usually had strong confidence on the power of their groups since they were supported by the Triad societies. The vertical structure of their groups and the group norm of offering help to the members in need also enhanced high mobilization power. As mentioned above, the groups of Triad Subculture usually defined the conflicts with the other groups as 'unbearable' conflicts, and they also had

confidence in their strength and mobilization power, thus, this kind of subcultural groups presented a 'Fighting Style' when facing challenges from the other gangs. They would respond in violence without hesitation.

Since the group of Friendship Subculture did not have direct relationship with the Triad, group members needed not protect the reputation of any organization. Thus, they usually defined the nature of conflicts with another gangs as 'versatile' conflicts which could either proceed to fight against or retreat from the rivalry gangs. Also, the confidence of the group members on the power of the group was rather low since they did not have support from any organization or powerful person. However, since many of them were neighbours and classmates, they had rather strong confidence on their mobilization power on the other group members to participate in fighting. To conclude, this kind of subcultural group exhibited an 'Opportunity Style' in their violence pattern. They would use violence to fight with the other gangs only if they were more powerful than the others apparently.

The group of the Semi-Triad Subculture also did not have to protect the reputation of any organization, thus, the group members also defined the conflicts with the other gangs as 'versatile' conflicts. Since the members had confidence in their physical strength, they regarded the power of their group as above average. As the members only knew each other for a few months, they had rather low assessment on their power to mobilize the other members to fight for them. As a whole, the violence-using pattern of this subcultural group was in an 'Opportunity Style'. They would only fight when they seemed to be more powerful than the opposite parties apparently.

The group of the Recreational Subculture also did not have any Triad background. The members needed not protect the reputation of any organization. Thus, the nature of conflicts with the other gangs was also 'versatile' conflicts. Since most of the group members were about 12 to 14 years old and had weak physical built-up, the group had very low confidence on their fighting power. In addition, the members also knew that they could not mobilize the other members to fight for them since most of the members had negative attitude in using violence as problem-solving mean and they gathered only for recreational purpose. Therefore, the attitude of the group in using violence was belonged to the 'Avoidance Style'. They would avoid fighting with the other gangs as far as possible. The mediating factors affecting the use of violence by different subcultural groups are delineated in Table 5.

The above discussions have clearly shown that different group subcultures including group values, group norms and group structure will facilitate different definitions of conflicts with rivalry groups, different perceptions of group power and mobilization power of members to participate in fighting events, thus affecting the exhibition of group violence patterns. This understanding may affect our interventions towards different subcultural groups so as to reduce the undesirable group behaviours.

VI Conclusion

Although the data was mainly collected through in-depth interviews, their credibility may be affected by the incompleteness of data provided by the interviewees due to short of memories or the psychological barriers to reveal certain events. However, the method of triangulation was adopted to reduce the errors through cross checking the information with the other group members and the responsible social workers. Thus, the typologies of violence exhibition, classification of subcultures and the conceptual models on the influences of subculture on violence exhibition derived through research data are still reliable. Since the research was conducted in the Tai Po District in Hong Kong and each district has different characteristics, the research results may not be suitable to generalize to other districts with different culture.

In this research, it was discovered that group values, group norms and group structure are three important elements in group subculture. Interventions in these three dimensions may reduce the exhibition of violence by the groups. Group members of the Triad and Semi-Triad Subcultural groups should be guided to reflect on the values of fighting for protecting face, as offering help to friends and as response to challenges. Drawbacks of employing violence should be emphasized. Awarding schemes can also be launched to help the groups to develop some positive group norms and behaviours such as refraining from using violence as a problem-solving means. In addition, the method of degroup may help to reduce the size of the group and affect the assessment of group power and thus reduces the intentions of the group members to fight with the other gangs. Recreational activities should be provided to the groups having the Friendship Subculture and Recreational Subculture groups to divert their times and energies to more positive ways.

Fig. 1 The Influences of Group Subculture on the Exhibition of Group Violence

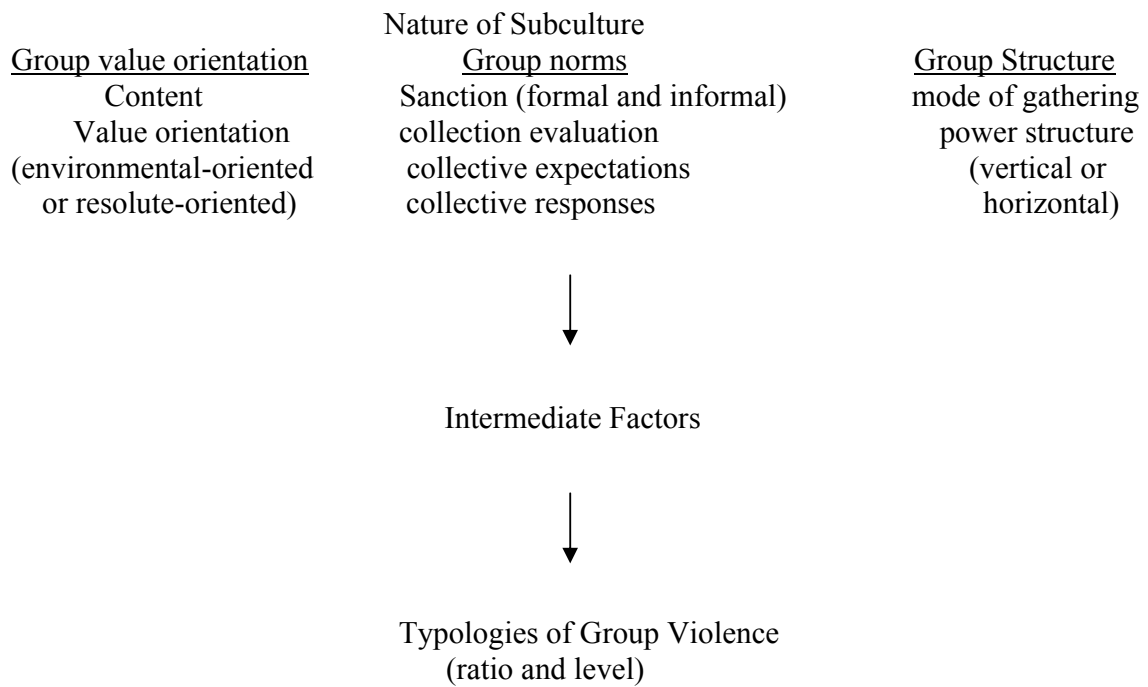


Table 1 Characteristics of Different Typologies of Violence

Typologies/ Characteristics	'High-High' Type	'High-Low' Type	'Low-High' Type	'Low-Low' Type
Ratios of using violence	High (100%)	High (73%)	Low (37.5%)	Low (12.5%)
Seriousness of violence	High	Low	High	Low
1. scale of participation	High (whole group)	Depends	Depends	Low (few members)
2. use of weapons	Yes	No	Yes	No
3. indicator of stop using violence	When either party was badly hurt	When either party has bruise in appearance	When either party was badly hurt	When either party has bruise in appearance

Notes: depends: depend on situation

Table 2 Value of Violence of Different Subculture

Types of Subculture/ Value on Violence	Triad Subculture	Friendship Subculture	Semi-Triad Subculture	Recreational Subculture
Value on violence	Tend to use violence	Mediate tendency to use violence	Rather high tendency to use violence	Low tendency to use violence
1. use violence to solve problems	Yes	Yes	Yes	A few members have this concept
2. Offer help to friends in need	Yes	Depends	Depends	Depends
3. take revenge after losing battle	Yes	Nil	Some members have this concept	Nil
4. protect face	Yes	Yes	Yes	Nil
5. respond with violence when facing challenge	Yes	Depends	Depends	Depends
6. No fear, strong support behind	Yes	Nil	Some members have this concept	Nil
7. raise their status by using violence	Yes	Nil	Nil	Nil

Notes: Nil: no this concept; depends: depends on situations

Table 3 Group Norms of Different Subcultures

Types of Subculture/ group norms	Triad Subculture	Friendship Subculture	Semi-Triad Subculture	Recreational Subcultural
Methods of sanction	Formal and informal	Informal	informal	No sanction
Collective evaluation on using violence	Unavoidable	No consensus	No consensus	Disprove of using violence
Collective expectation on using violence	beat those insulting them and the reput-ation of the Triad	No consensus	No consensus	Avoid using violence as far as possible
Collective responses on using violence	whole group participation	Individual determination (depends on situations)	Individual determination (depends on situations)	Refrain from use of violence

Table 4 Group Structure of Different Subculture

Types of Subculture/ Group Structure	Triad Subculture	Friendship Subculture	Semi-Triad Subculture	Recreational Subculture
Gathering pattern	Frequent group gathering	Frequent group gathering	Frequent group gathering	Frequent group gathering
Power structure	Vertical	Horizontal	Horizontal	Horizontal

Table 5 Mediating Factors Affecting the Use of Violence by Different Subcultural Groups

Types of Subculture/ Mediating factor	Triad Subculture	Friendship Subculture	Semi-Triad Subculture	Recreational Subculture
Definition on the nature of conflict	Unresolvable conflict	Versatile conflict	Versatile conflict	Versatile conflict
Assessment on group strength	High (have the support of Triad and Hokklos)	Below average (no other source of support)	Above average	Low (members are young with weak physical built-up)
Assessment on the group mobilization power	High	Above average	Below average	Low
Response Style	'Fighting Style'	'Opportunity Style'	'Opportunity Style'	Avoidance Style'