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# **An Ethnography of Youth Texts on Gangs, Trouble and Rehabilitation**

**A dissertation presented in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in  
Psychology at Massey University**

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# Abstract

Guided by the premise that the best information about the experience of young people would come from young people contacted directly in the field, *An ethnography of youth texts on gangs, trouble and rehabilitation* focuses on the thesis that by carefully reading and attending to the spoken texts of youth, psychologists can enhance their understanding, learn from, and improve their relationships with them. Youth texts were generated from fifty three recorded interviews, one month participant-observation in a residential unit, one month participant observation with a neighbourhood gang, photography and many casual conversations in the field. Thematic analysis was used as a method for carefully reading participant texts and attempting to develop an understanding of what Geertz (1983) called local knowledge. Rehabilitation at Te Whakapakari Youth Programme (Great Barrier Island, New Zealand) was the first site where youth texts were gathered and discussed with an aim of capturing the richness of experience that exists in the lives of the programme participants. Looking back on their experience of the youth programme two years later participants described healing themes related to the experience of whaanau (extended family), helping, talking, listening, trusting, respecting and disciplined working. Trouble is the second site in which I tapped youth texts. I found trouble was conceptualised as fun, easy, and about being seen to be “bad.” Participants did not perceive themselves to be “in trouble” unless they had been caught, although trouble was seen as a way to make money, a form of vulnerability and part of their social niche. The third site in which I probe for youth texts is in youth gangs. Over-riding most gang activity there seemed to be a desire for affiliation and belonging. They talked about the parties, hanging with “the boys,” girls, telling jokes together, laughing, meeting new people, talking, arguing and public recognition or “fame.” In terms of gender sub themes of “gangs are for men” and “caring for women” emerged as complimentary forms of exclusionary talk. If women crossed the gender line to attempt to function in “men’s space” (as tomboys) they lost their supportive and prized sexual value but were still forced into a sexual role by the

boys. While vulnerability increased the likelihood of seeking gang based protection, joining a gang dramatically increased participants' protection needs and scope of vulnerability. Increases in violence, threats and feelings of vulnerability were however, coupled with feelings of togetherness, helping, supporting and generally backing each other up. Key discussion issues included empowering indigenous approaches to rehabilitation, defining youth gangs and youth gang membership in New Zealand, the influences of American cultural imperialism on New Zealand youth, and the convergence of empirical data with theoretical perspectives on vulnerability. Suggestions were made for future research topics.



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