Gangs: groups of young people and deviant behavior. The psychosocial perspective in analysis and intervention

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Resumen

En este trabajo se exponen distintas líneas de intervención en el ámbito local, grupal, familiar y educativo de cara a la prevención de algunas de las conductas desviadas –tales como agresiones, robos, ciertos patrones de tráfico y consumo de sustancias legales e ilegales- protagonizadas por una minoría de jóvenes y grupos juveniles. Dichas medidas se cimentan en el trabajo de investigación realizado por nuestro equipo durante más de una década. El conjunto de criterios propuestos -que permiten, en primer lugar, interpretar el fenómeno y, en segundo lugar, realizar un posible análisis diferencial respecto de otros fenómenos- se integra en el concepto de "cultura de la violencia", cuyo valor heurístico reside en destacar la función identitaria de determinadas conductas en contextos de déficit de inserción social. Las propuestas de intervención, con un marcado carácter preventivo, hacen énfasis en la necesidad de una participación activa, implicante y responsable de todos los jóvenes en la gestión a nivel local de sus posibilidades y, por tanto, se orientan a la construcción de una fuerte identidad cívica como la más eficaz dimensión de comparación alternativa a la violencia.

Palabras Clave: Jóvenes y grupos juveniles, violencia y conductas desviadas, prevención e intervención comunitarias

Abstract

This work presents different lines of intervention in the local, group, family and educational contexts aimed at prevention of some deviant behaviors - such as violence, theft and certain patterns of trafficking and use of legal and illegal substances – as practiced by a minority of young people and youth sub-culture groups. These interventions are based on the research work of our team over the course of more than ten years. The set of criteria proposed falls within the concept of "culture of violence", whose heuristic value lies in stressing the identity function of certain behaviors in contexts where there is a lack of social insertion. These criteria permit us, first of all, to interpret the phenomenon, and second, to carry out a possible differential analysis with respect to other phenomena. Proposals for intervention, of a markedly preventive nature, emphasize the need for active, responsible involvement and participation of all young people in managing their possibilities at a local level, and are therefore oriented towards construction of a strong civic identity as the most effective alternative dimension to violence.

Key words: Young people and youth sub-culture groups, violence and deviant behavior, community prevention and intervention.

"It's like riding your bike on a cycle track, going round and round, and it's fucking awesome on the track that you're used to, cool, but once you go out, you realize what else there is out there and you realize that you're missing out, you know?"

Youth belonging to a violent group

Introduction

Over the last ten years our research team, attached to the Social Psychology Department of the *Autónoma* University of Madrid, has been carrying out a series of studies aimed at examining risk behaviors in the youth population[1] (Martín et al., 1998) and, specifically, violence between groups of young people[2] (Martín, 2005; San José et al., 2003; Scandroglio et al., 2000; Scandroglio et al., 2003a; Scandroglio et al., 2003b). In this paper we present the conclusions drawn from results of the most recent study, which can be referred to in more detail in other sources (San José et. al., 2003; Scandroglio et al., 2000; Scandroglio et al., 2003a; Scandroglio et al., 2003b). Based on these conclusions, we sketch (1) a differential analysis of the phenomenon, and (2) guidelines for intervention in the different socialization contexts. We consider that the results that we base ourselves on can be generalized to group violence in youth, since they coincide with those obtained in studies at the national and international level and which analyze differential factors of the phenomenon, fundamentally identity-related and group factors (see the review of youth violence in Scandroglio et al., 2002).

In this study, the quantitative approach (self-applied questionnaires drawn up by the team) has been balanced with the qualitative approach (semi-structured, in-depth interviews) in different samples of youth residing in the Madrid Region. Quantitative instruments were developed based on the most recent operational proposals from two long-established theoreti-

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[1] Project "*Comportamientos de riesgo asociados al ocio en la juventud de la Comunidad Autónoma de Madrid*" [Risk behaviors associated with free time in youth of the Madrid Region], Department of Education and Culture, II Regional Research Plan, Madrid Region, Project PRO 0026/94.
[2] Project "Génesis y evolución de la violencia grupal juvenil" [Birth and evolution of youth group violence], CICyT, National R&D Plan, File SEC98-0267. Project "Juventud y violencia grupal en la Comunidad Autónoma de Madrid: desarrollo de modelos psico-sociales causales que faciliten la predicción y prevención de conductas violentas" [Youth and group violence in the Madrid Region: developing causal psycho-social models that facilitate predicting and preventing violent behaviors], Department of Education and Culture, Madrid Region, Project PRO 051/007/1996.

cal models of proven applicability in the area of Social Psychology: the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1985, 1991) and the Theory of Social Identity (Hogg & Hains, 1996; Hogg, Hardie & Reynolds, 1995; Terry, Hogg & White, 1999). Satisfactory results were achieved in the structural equation models (R^2=75% for intention to perform the behavior and R^2=47% for performance of the behavior), ranking high with respect to the mean (R^2=39% or R^2=41% for intention to perform the behavior and R^2=27% or R^2=34% for performance of the behavior) as indicated in the most recent meta-analyses (respectively, Armitage & Conner, 2001; Godin & Kok, 1996). The quantitative instrument was applied to 285 male youth and 311 female youth between 14 and 25 years of age. Elsewhere, interviews were held with 40 males and 5 females between the ages of 16 and 26, also residents of the Madrid region, who had different degrees of involvement in violent behavior: those classified as *violent* had to have physically assaulted someone on two or more occasions during the year prior to the interview, as members of one group attacking members of another group; those classified of *post violent* had to have shown this behavior in the past, but not during the year prior to the interview; the *non-violent* could not have participated in violent confrontations at any time, and additionally, we attempted to select these persons from environmental conditions similar to those of the *violent* individuals; finally, the *pre- violent* could have had no violent confrontation or one confrontation only, but it had to be an isolated, chance incident. The interviewees belonged to groups with various ideologies and esthetics: Skin Heads, Sharps, Bakalas, Heavies, Punks, Rappers, Graffiti writers, Skaters, Latin Kings and Latin Queens or, simply, "from the barrio"- so as to encompass a good share of the subculture manifestations that have appeared successively on the Spanish public scene since the early nineties. Included are groups of young Latin Americans who figure in the most recent outbreak of social alarm, ensuring that factors stemming from migration processes are represented in this research.

One of the objectives which the team pursues is to try to break the pernicious associations between youth, cultural manifestations, deviant behavior and delinquency. Certainly phenomena should be understood within the specific contexts where they appear and develop. Consequently, in the current situation, marked by new cultural contributions from immigrant groups and the consequences of policies whose priority is macroeconomic development, it is likely that we must introduce certain of these aspects into an explanation of youth group dynamics. In any case, we believe that all this does not alter the meaning of the manifestations we are dealing with. New youths come onto the scene who are stigmatized as "different" or "worse" than those who caught our attention just a few years ago, simply due to more visible

features of their appearance, and when this fails, due to convenience, claiming that they are "foreigners", "marginalized" or "delinquent". However, based on newly acquired knowledge, the conclusions are unchanged: groups of youth who are involved in deviant behavior, especially violence, constitute one visible symptom of the difficulties faced by youth in our society as they seek to successfully resolve identity issues in the socioeconomic context they must live in (Scandroglio et al., 2003; Scandroglio et al., 2000).

Understanding these manifestations as a symptom of deficient social insertion involves critically analyzing the phenomenon and questioning its association with more circumstantial, anecdotal factors, as we have mentioned, such as ideology, pathology, common delinquency and, currently, immigration (Scandroglio et al., 2002). Even though it can be a comforting thought, one cannot consider, in a simplified, generalized sense, that young people and groups involved in deviant behavior are the "armed wing" of ideological groups, normally led by adults, a situation which security forces in our society have not been able to demonstrate (Iglesias, 1997); they cannot be considered delinquents, nor uprooted immigrants nor simply problem individuals (Scandroglio et al., 2002). Though some of these manifestations are part of the phenomenon being considered, the latter needs its own framework for understanding and intervention. We believe that the concept of a "culture of violence" (Scandroglio et al., 2003a, 2003b) is the appropriate heuristic tool that allows us, on one hand, to interpret manifestations which at first may appear to be heterogeneous as symptoms of the same problem, and on the other hand, to differentiate such symptoms and manifestations from others that refer to different problem areas. Contributions from recent years, especially in approaches dedicated to prevention and the to advancement of young people and their groups, have made it possible to specify, lay a foundation for and measure the extent of both the concept "culture of violence" as well as its heuristic value. Violence is once again, for certain youth subgroups, a agreed-upon form of expression, a legitimate action and re-action, an effective strategy and an opportunity for "social existence" (the term was used by Pérez García in order to refer to social use of the "street" stigma, 2003).

Before concluding this introduction, it is essential to establish a distinction between what is defined today as *bullying* (see Benítez & Justicia, 2006 or Díaz-Aguado, 2005), closely connected to the educational context, and youth group violence, where there is aggression from one or more young people as members of one group against members of another group (Scandroglio et al., 2000; Scandroglio et al., 2002): although some manifestations of

bullying may overlap with youth group violence, the opposite is not true, thus the former is a broader category than the latter, and thus involves a set of explanatory factors which does not fully coincide (see the review on youth violence in Scandroglio et al., 2002). Some of the observations inherent in the differential analysis will help to explain in more detail the distinction which we have just pointed out.

Young people, groups and deviant behavior

The young person

Today's socioeconomic situation in itself is making it difficult for the young person to take control of his or her future; generalized phenomena include a retreat to the present, opportunities for fulfillment being limited to a restricted circle of friendships, and interests channeled toward rather modest, conventional goals. This retreat is also seen in the values held; aside from a moral relativism along the line of "live and let live", we find value given to close relationships with friends and family, education, employment and building one's own family. The same seems to occur with identity models: where they exist, they come from the most immediate surroundings, once again, the family and the peer group. Young people involved in different deviant behaviors with their groups maintain relatively satisfactory relationships in their respective family settings (Martín et al., 1998). By this we mean that they are not conflict-prone, or at most, they are prone to conflict with only one of their parents. In addition, the family structure is regular and stable. Neither of these characteristics are typical of young people who have initiated a path of delinquency. One can note, however, a certain imbalance between the functions of support and supervision: a deficit in the latter diminishes the family's role of rule-setting (Scandroglio et al., 2000). The educational context, for its part, does not play an important role in socialization, at least not directly, since for many of these young people it is just a place to nurture the relationships needed for consolidating one's peer group (Scandroglio et al., 2003a; Scandroglio et al., 2000). This is especially so because the educational context seems to be unable to connect with the interests of the young person or to respond to his or her needs in the present.

The group

For a broad sector of youth, where there are a significant number involved in violent behaviors, the peer group constitutes the single, preferred center for social interaction (Scandroglio et al., 2003a; Scandroglio et al., 2003b). Within the group and thanks to it, some of

the most crucial demands of human development are met: constructing and trying out one's personal and gender identity; developing social abilities and competencies; defining a values and beliefs system. Within the group and thanks to it, they "occupy" a time and space that, with rites of passage to adulthood unclear, ends up being "impassable". And for the peer group, or for some of its members, "they would go so far as to kill", a self-denial which is partly rhetorical, and which is not the prerogative of specific ideological or culture groups.

If we take into account that the victims of some of the deviant behaviors of these groups, such as assault or robbery, are mainly young people who belong to other groups, it becomes evident that they share a common framework which "legitimizes" such actions on both sides (Scandroglio et al., 2003a). This common framework is defined by relationships of inter-group comparison, where a culture is being constructed, and at the same time providing a context for socialization. On the other hand, certain attributes begin to stand out within this framework and become the "ideal" for the young people that are involved in deviant behaviors with their group (Scandroglio et al., 2003b). This "ideal", which young people try to personify both at the individual and group levels, fulfills very important functions for group dynamics: it increases cohesion thanks to the attraction established between those who adopt the ideal; it also regulates commitment to the group and to its leadership roles; finally, it protects group boundaries. Solidarity, support and backing, or being ready to intervene to defend one's friends, are all characteristics prescribed by the "ideal", and at the same time, are features of the group and of its most valued members, being used for evaluating and becoming "attractive" to each other. An individual's adherence to the "ideal" attributes, which proceed directly from the established dimensions for comparison—such as "being respected" or "being the strongest", and the reciprocity rule—determine to what extent the young member is representative, and therefore, the likelihood that he will be supported as leader of the group. Finally, when these same attributes become elements of one's self-concept, they also increase the individual's commitment toward the group.

Group structure is at the service of some of these deviant behaviors which such groups are involved in, particularly violence, endeavoring to stay within the area of expected symbolic consequences, and to avoid falling into the area of really fearful consequences (Scandroglio et al., 2003a). Group structure allows for a categorical, dichotomous reconstruction of reality, it indicates who the victims are, develops arguments which justify hostility and attacks against the latter, provides support and material protection from the violence of others, holds

up and validates the "ideal", which in turn activates standards for self-evaluation and self-realization. The mechanisms of social learning, on the other hand, ensure adherence to the rule system which the group maintains—see reciprocity, for example—and they organize the group's activities so as to fulfill its functions. This is done through selecting and adopting important goals (San José et al., 2003). The group, in other words, is an integral part of the behaviors, because it ensures the attainment of most of what is being pursued, and avoids the more harmful repercussions. In fact, we must point out that the group curbs extreme reactions, disallowing personal cruelty from one of its members during confrontations, as well as dependency on certain legal or illegal substances (Scandroglio et al., 2003a). Group structure also exalts the "macho" culture, which, paradoxically, through practicing their own gender competency, becomes the only way which some youths find to build a bridge to reach the other gender, the woman. This is a dialectic process of mutual understanding which begins from extreme opposites—probably in order to diminish any confusion, doubt and ignorance—and, thanks to the security attained through practice, eventually reaches a more interpersonal approach. In this sense, it is significant that the groups are single-sex, although some groups are appearing now which are made up exclusively of girls who take on the features of the male groups; often, these are the girlfriends of male gang members who make a stand for themselves.

Deviant behaviors: violence

The most significant conclusion from our acquired knowledge is that youth group violence is not a phenomenon that arises from elements of individual irrationality or deviations, but it is a structured behavior within a system of behavioral norms, attitudes and resources which determine the contexts and motives that justify it, the positive repercussions that are gained, and how to minimize the damages caused (San José et al., 2003; Scandroglio et al., 2003a). Such a system becomes integrated, is developed, and becomes intelligible within a subculture that gives meaning to its own actions according to a certain world view. A young person's adherence to this view marks out a specific socialization process which has functional utility for both the young person and for the group. Violence, in turn, fits in and takes on meaning within a certain social context, which contributes to its eruption and perpetuates it over time.

The young person values and perceives certain positive consequences as possible from the practice of violence: first, attainment of "respect" and maintaining status, defense for one-

self and for the other group members, compensation for prior aggressions (Scandroglio et al., 2003a). At the same time, for young people who find themselves in a cycle of violence, both confrontations as well as the "respect" gained diminish the likelihood of others attacking. Additionally, violent confrontation strengthens the perception of unity and increases solidarity, lending importance to the reciprocity rule and to compliance with it. The consequences which we have just listed are prescribed and justified by a set of rules which, moreover, activate and promote resources and legitimate channels to reach and maintain them (Scandroglio et al., 2003a). It is no coincidence that group norms which link the group to violent behavior include those that defend the group status and also personal status, determining what threats put this status in doubt and what strategies are to be used for restoring it. Here we must add those norms which specifically demarcate confrontations, regulating their beginning, duration, end, the possession and use of arms, and types of physical aggression which are perceived as legitimate. However, the most critical rules are those which ensure support and protection of the peer group, that is, of reciprocity and responsibility. Finally, some of the norms, and basically the peer group itself, become avoidance strategies against harmful consequences of the behavior (Scandroglio et al., 2003a). Other resources which help to reduce or escape from negative repercussions, in addition to psychological processes of stereotyping to depersonalize the victims, include avoiding certain areas and paraphernalia when one is alone, obtaining information about the enemy, carrying weapons and doing physical exercise.

Finally, violence is usually associated with other deviant behaviors: stealing (particularly clothing and objects such as glasses, cell phones, etc.), consumption of illegal substances (where patterns depend on recreational style, subculture prescriptions and fashion) and small-scale trafficking, whose income basically covers the cost of consumption, recreation and dress (always very expensive) as prescribed by fashion or the subculture to which the young people and their groups belong. These amount to different responses to the same identity function and the same dynamic of inter-group comparison; on the other hand, they become associated with certain styles and recreational settings. In other words, they all answer to the same "culture of violence" or "of respect" or "of honor".

The culture of violence

The young people interviewed carry out their life in a space criss-crossed with different cultures which can be adopted and adapted in order to resolve some of their life challenges. First of all we find the cultural outlines which define how to be a young person today,

and within these, one's options depending on age and gender. Most noticeable are those which affect use of free time. This is the privileged area where youth micro-cultures or sub-cultures are played out in a preferential or "appropriate" way. "Free time" is the real, common framework shared by micro or subcultures which adhere to a "culture of respect", "honor" or "violence"; for this reason, this type of culture is not identified with specific ideologies or specific youth subcultures *per se*, where justification via argumentation is required. Adapting such cultural proposals into specific lifestyles gives them a quality of "resistance" to parity, alignment and invisibility, wherever possible. For this reason it is surprising to find rather "conventional" views of the future, values and identity models, in contrast to the perception of a greater margin of freedom; or forms of hypo-socialization which contrast with the sense of greater room for mobility.

It is a challenge to try to determine the breeding ground for a "culture of violence". We tend to feel that, although it may have "low class" features, and socioeconomic circumstances may be prodromical, these are neither the ultimate cause nor a discriminating factor. We must recognize that the culture of violence is easily exported, and is shared by practically all youths who are involved with their respective groups in violent behaviors, even when they come from very different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. Perhaps it is more appropriate to ask why the competitive dimension, which we refer to when we speak of violence and a "culture of violence", turns out to be what is most adaptive for some youths. We have seen that wherever it becomes established, the competitive dimension contributes toward the construction of a positive personal identity, specifically including gender identity or the role of gender. It can be assumed, then, that some youths do not find effective tools to "become somebody" other than by appealing to physical strength and to the group which is behind them. Along these lines, violence allows them to unambiguously resolve doubts as to their own superiority. On the other hand, the young people of today—regardless of their country's level of economic development—are those who most dramatically suffer the tensions generated by paradoxical circumstances such as having greater access to education but fewer possibilities for employment, greater access to information but fewer possibilities to effectively participate in the power structure, greater expectations for autonomy but fewer possibilities for making it happen (Cruz Roja Española, 2006:26). All this drastically reduces identity dimensions which are the components of a valid, current basis for other social identities, creating a deficient context where once again violence can become the only strategy for resolution.

Differential analysis

Do youths who are involved in deviant behaviors (such as violence) with their peer group suffer from psychological dysfunction or behavior problems? Based on the data at our disposal, as always, we cannot associate the type of behaviors we are considering with any "congenital" behavior disorder, aggressiveness, or lack of control: we can attribute a tendency to react aggressively to conflict situations, for example, only to a small minority of one or two youths per group. These individuals have had some kind of behavior problem during childhood and they continue to manifest it outside of the group, that is, when the group has already disbanded. Neither can we apply the label of "irrational" to violence exercised by groups of young people: as explained above, such groups usually have rules about using and carrying weapons, rules regulating fights in terms of their beginning, duration, and cruelty, about what may be considered an offense or provocation against the status of a member or of the group, and how to make amends for it. It must be emphasized here that, although physical harm is a basic element in the economy and organization of confrontations, the annihilation of one's adversary is not held as the ultimate goal: serious or mortal injuries, in the vast majority of cases, are not intentional. Finally, unless the group has deliberately adopted this tactic, victims are not selected indiscriminately; they are usually members of opposing or rival groups.

What is the difference between youths and groups who are involved in deviant behavior like violence, and those who are considered common delinquents? Even though some members of these groups may be qualified as common delinquents, these are the minority, and they usually commit offences before joining the group and outside the group, and in general they continue to do so after leaving the group. Indeed, according to data at our disposal, most youths belonging such groups involved in deviant behavior, once they reach 22 or 23 years of age, discontinue such behavior and leave the group, they either pursue some training or professional objectives for the future, they entering job market, or they establish a stable relationship, normally with a girl who does not belong to the same environment ("the girlfriend period"). Moreover, although it is true that many of the young members of these groups do also consume illegal drugs, and even "do business" in order to pay for their consumption, for recreation and for acquiring the clothing "prescribed" for members, this is not synonymous with delinquency per se, or what we traditionally have understood as delinquency—getting income through illegal operations—since it is not the motive for forming or maintaining the group. Finally, in a large majority of cases, victims are members of opposing or rival

groups, and not other young people who are competing for their share of the illegal money-making operations.

As we have indicated, we also consider it inappropriate to claim a simple, linear association between this phenomenon and problems linked to immigration. First, while it is true that the immigrant youth sector may be trying to make up for possible deficits in terms of integration, in this they are no different from other groups made up of native-born youths: in both cases integration issues occur in a public space which makes these youths marginal or invisible. Lack of valid dimensions for identification or comparison in order to gain status, or of standards of reference outside the peer group, may be due to uprooting and stigmatizing involved in the immigration process, but also to possibilities and options being limited by structural, social and cultural circumstances surrounding some non-immigrant youth. Second, while it is true that belonging to immigrant families and therefore, families more often separated or in need of income from both parents, can heighten problems caused by lack of supervision, this same problem is also a factor influencing the case of native-born youth. Third, while it is true that they may have substandard living quarters, which in turn encourages spending most of one's time "on the street", we must note that most young people who belong to or did belong to groups like the Skin Heads, Sharps, Bakalas, Heavies, Punks, Rappers, Graffitiers, Skaters or, even the *macarras* or *malotes*, spend their free time on the street, and meet in public places in the neighborhood, such as squares, gardens, sports courts, candy stores, game arcades, entryways, etc. It is quite easy, just from what you hear on the news, to label the immigrant-comprised "Latin gangs" as something different from other native youth phenomena that have taken place and continue to do so: not being Spanish is the first obvious characteristic and is also the first criterion used in categorizing these groups. This inappropriate association brings with it two aggravating effects: in young people particularly it can provoke an effect of "self-fulfilling prophecy", and when it has to do with immigrant youth, it promotes racism in the general population. Young people end up taking on the stereotypes which are attributed to them socially, aggravating the problem or taking it to its extreme. On the other hand, any non-Spanish youth who dresses "baggy and wears a hat" automatically belongs to a "Latin gang".

In conclusion, as professionals in the social sphere, we should avoid assigning those youths who are involved in deviant behaviors with their groups over to "pathology", "delinquency" or "marginalization". The phenomenon should be responsibly interpreted as a symp-

tom of the social condition in which certain groups of young people find themselves, whether immigrants or not. The various manifestations of the phenomenon, including "Latin gangs", are not "imported": foreign cultural elements are laid over native ones, and whether these gangs "appear on the scene" depends on the social, economic and political context in which we live. For immigrant youth, certainly, the need to reconstruct a space for social integration becomes urgent and inescapable. For some of them, this need can become a vulnerability factor that exposes them to risk situations. Furthermore, both from the interviews held and an analysis of treatment by the media, the police, and the judicial system[3], it is obvious that many Latin American youth who have been involved with their groups in deviant behaviors such as violence or stealing—at least certain patterns of stealing—were first victims not only of the culture of violence encompassing a sub-sector of native-born youths and their groups, but also of a socially orchestrated witch hunt as well. Therefore, by way of introduction to the next section, intervention and prevention should become not only social and civic actions, but also cultural; in other words, they should become a process of cultural dialog.

Intervention and prevention

Axiological guidelines

Taking heavy-handed, "instantaneous" measures which tend to eliminate the more obvious manifestations of this type of youth phenomena have little effect on the underlying conditions which produce it (see the recent, excellent review by Greene & Pranis, 2007). What is worse, some evidence shows that, in contexts where systematic follow-up took place, the problem recurred some time later after these measures were employed, perhaps under another guise, and with even greater severity (Greene & Pranis, 2007). Actions taken to intervene in a problem when it has already become visible are usually for containment and are not framed in long-term plans, meaning that professionals in the social sphere, who are those ultimately responsible for applying such measures, are in a state of constant precariousness, instability, discontinuity and/or wishful thinking. On the other hand, recognizing that the tension between integration and differentiation is an element which characterizes relationships between adults and youth, the challenge is not so much to suppress different types of youth behavior, but to

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[3] Project "¿Reyes y Reinas Latinos? Identidades culturales de los jóvenes de origen latinoamericano en España." [Latin Kings and Queens? Cultural identities in youth of Latin American origin in Spain.] National R&D&I Plan 2005-07, File SEJ2005-09333-C02-02/SOCI.

create social and personal conditions which allow them to freely, responsibly take on their own development.

In addition to these general considerations, and before specifying intervention and prevention strategies, it is important to underscore four axiological guidelines for action, as derived from approaches of *Participative Action-Research* and *Social and Community Psychology* (Campart & Scandroglio, 1998; Martín & López, 2007):

- The first and most fundamental guideline, as a starting line for any action, is to seek out and strengthen *direct, active participation* of the young people themselves throughout the whole process, from establishing objectives and intervention procedures through to execution and evaluation. Participation makes it possible to find a place in the social fabric and be recognized as a valid entity therein, it encourages action plans suitable to the needs of the social agents, builds motivation and involvement in the actions, and promotes establishment of communication channels, which in turn become an effective defense against exclusion and marginalization.

- The second guideline identifies the setting of daily activity as the preferred level for taking action, that is, the network composed especially of *peer groups, family and educational* contexts, the *neighborhood,* the more or less formal *organizations* which meet in such settings, and finally, the *professionals* and *public institutions* which provide services and become guarantors of civic peace in the area. The "local" perspective can effectively resolve the existing strain between "globalization" (or in the case of some groups of Latin American youth, "cross-nationalization") and "tribalization", by preparing a scenario where the day-to-day takes on meaning, without losing sight of the horizon, and where there can be mutual "recognition" among social players.

- The third guideline is that contexts of youth participation should ensure both autonomy and differentiation, thus strengthening social creativity. These spaces must be planned so as to give representation to "the opposition" and to "rebellion"—promoting dialog, especially that language and symbolic expression are the only possible alternative to physical violence—and to translating these expressions into action aimed at social change. These should not be predominantly "recreational" or "cultural" spaces, they should reach into other dimensions of involvement in the lives of young people, espe-

cially the work world. We indicated above that the contexts of youth participation are the vehicle for corresponding social roles or identities. They allow for the experience of being socially competent, to make life plans, and to gain social visibility and recognition. Thus it is necessary to intentionally, systematically reverse the harmful trend in recent decades to set up and reserve only the social role of consumer for young people.

- ▪ The fourth and final guideline encourages keeping a proper psychosocial perspective in conflicts with youths and groups of youths, responsibly and strategically avoiding individualist views, whether in attribution of responsibilities or in defining intervention strategies. Changes will extend further and last longer if they are produced and maintained by means of group and community dynamics. Actions which seek to modify perceptions and behaviors which were developed through the socialization process should likewise use the socialization process as a change strategy.

Despite scarce data on the effectiveness of controlled-design community programs, largely due to the difficulties of implementation and evaluation, it is possible to infer a set of characteristics or actions common to community programs that have proven effective from a more open approach to evaluation: they incorporate empowerment and self-competency as a global strategy, directed at the individual, the group and the community; they extend over the long term; they include effective control systems and evaluation; they are coherent and consistent between what is proposed and what is executed; they create and enable socially positive, visible roles; they promote training and employment; they address reaching suitable educational goals; they put emphasis on personal, relational, cognitive and affective skills which make suitable family ties possible (Goldstein et al., 1989; Sherman, Farrington, Welsh & McKenzie, 2002).

Local and group context

From this framework, priority strategies are those that bring "public" management closer to young people, enabling support for forging a positive personal identity and for connecting this with a "civic" identity. Some experiences of this type have been successful in reducing violence and gang membership (Krug et al., 2003). Consequently, in order to design public policy on matters of youth (mainly from the local authorities), the starting place is invariably a needs analysis which in addition to focusing attention on the priority interests and problem areas, establishes communication channels where young people, professional work-

ers, and political authorities can jointly agree on lines of action. The latter would further facilitate integration and appropriation of the different actions to be implemented. Finally, this process would promote mutual understanding between the different social agents, a feeling of belonging to an interdependent citizenry and an awareness of the human and material resources that they possess or can acquire. For all these reasons, intervention actions with youths and groups of young people should seek to:

- Promote participation and a sense of belonging
- Promote control over plans, actions and resources
- Promote responsibility
- Promote social creativity
- Create spaces for responsible autonomy
- Encourage acquisition of coexistence norms
- Coordinate and integrate actions taken through the different developmental contexts
- Share supervision among the different contexts or settings.
- Enable the design of forward-looking life plans.

One specific way to enable participation is by creating or strengthening valid mechanisms for dialog with local institutions, where young people can express their opinions, petitions and suggestions relating to their social condition and to actions being carried out through the initiative of the local administration. In this case, in addition to participation from leaders of associations and formal groups, it may be necessary to include representatives of informal groups, depending on the density of the association network. We have seen that for some youth, the group is the only scenario for trying out one's possibilities and it is their primary socialization channel. Thus, it should not be considered a factor of vulnerability, instead, it should be made use of as a primary player in change processes and purposeful action. Therefore, promoting actions toward channeling youth initiative into the creation of associations, through information, advising and continued support, can be decisive in articulating their social fabric, generating cohesion and enabling channels for dialog. Programs for training youth leaders and mediators, designed to develop communication, leadership, and conflict negotiation skills, seem to be an effective strategy for achieving lasting change (Red Cross of Spain, 2006).

Despite the stereotypes of the *pasota* (indifferent and unmotivated) – which we have borne with for over a decade—and now the *pandillero* (violent and antisocial), there is a large potential for initiative and integration on the part of young people in terms of organizing activities. Through research and also intervention which team members have carried out in recent years, in collaboration with other university teams[4], we can say that the Latin American groups bring new energy in this sense, since they are open to participate in community development jointly with the institutions—they are not as distrusting as the native born people. Regardless of whether the stereotypes reflect reality to a greater or lesser extent—always a controversial question—it is necessary to generate a process of positive social labeling, supporting and publicizing through local media any activity of interest which the young people are pursuing. However, youths often are unaware of the mechanisms they need for carrying out their initiatives, what resources are at their disposal, or the commitments or limits involved in using public spaces. In order to help them overcome this obstacle, action should be taken to provide information, support, and advising on the way to present project or activity proposals to local institutions. As for "occupying" spaces, and the existence of informal groups and networks, a two-fold strategy can be useful: on one hand, allow these spaces to continue existing and to allow their use, since they may represent a primary socialization setting linked to the natural groups of the area; on the other hand, simultaneously launch a process of making the youth themselves responsible for their use. These steps, instilling stereotype change processes, and the two axiological principles indicated above, will enable:

- Creation of a space where common goals can be put forward and categories of integration constructed: each young person along with his or her natural membership group would participate—in the two roles of young person and citizen—in managing the services, resources, opportunities in their daily context of interaction.

- Avoidance of different groups and players living as potential threats both to their own identities and to coexistence. Consequently, cultural differences would be perceived as enriching and equally valid among themselves.

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[4] Project: "¿Reyes y Reinas Latinos? Identidades culturales de los jóvenes de origen latinoamericano en España." [Latin Kings and Queens? Cultural identities of Latin American youth in Spain.] National R&D&I Plan 2005-07, File SEJ2005-09333-C02-02/SOCI.

- ▪ Keeping social, civic and cultural dialog open, this way redefining and reframing the democratic space for coexistence, such that on one hand, contributions from the different groups are acknowledged and integrated, and on the other hand, the norms that undergird such a space are reinforced.

These goals should be incorporated, urgently and intentionally, in actions which target groups of immigrant youth, especially to reverse negative social labeling processes, and to reduce the impact of the migration process (Feixa, Porzio & Recio, 2006). Along these lines, we consider it a priority to strengthen participation of immigrant youth in social insertion processes, encouraging them to organize and structure themselves as a network which cooperates with families and public services in welcoming, supporting, training and following up the "new arrivals". Participation from youth will ensure that the attention addresses real needs, will guide the search and selection of means, and will most effectively and economically adapt them. Moreover, it would be an integration strategy for youth to participate in the service and to encourage establishment of networks for creative cooperatives and companies that would also address the needs for job placement.

Family context

Family interventions have been the object of special attention for preventing different antisocial behaviors, and they have shown a significant degree of effectiveness, whether applied in isolation or with other actions (Sherman et al., 2002; Utting, 2003; Welsh & Farrington, 2006). It would be helpful to simultaneously encourage the formation of parent groups where training is provided to work on knowledge and skills for raising children. Some of the most important skills that might be worked on in this type of program include the *inductive parental style* (Baumrind, 1985), which consists of combining affective support, autonomy, and freedom to express ideas, on one hand, with supervision or control on the other hand; *communication and conflict resolution strategies*; and strategies for producing *coherence in the norms and values system* involved in raising children (Rutter, Giller & Hagell, 2000). This way, family communication channels would be established, providing information, training and affection, and simultaneously offering young people a differentiated selection of normative standards and dimensions for evaluation, without any socialization context being supplanted by another. It would also establish collaboration between families and other settings for supervising their children's activities. Training for childrearing, where affective ties are improved, coherent childrearing methods are practiced, and parents are helped towards devel-

oping self-control in raising their children (Thornton et al., 2000); and family therapies for improved communication and interaction between parents and children in problem solving (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2001) have proven to be effective interventions for preventing violence and other deviant behaviors whose effects are long lasting. Actions taken in the family setting, therefore, should set out to meet the following objectives:

- Effectively monitor and supervise children's activities, in balance with affective support.
- Establish rules through clear, unambiguous instructions, so that the child learns what is expected of him or her.
- Keep confrontations and crises from developing, through finding options for fun and entertainment.
- Promote strategies that facilitate proper expression of disagreement and binding negotiation in conflicts that appear within the family setting.
- Sensitize toward children's needs and tendencies.
- Foster prosocial behaviors based on self-efficacy and use of tools for social problem solving.
- Strengthen development of internal controls through open communication, recognizing children's rights and the assumption of responsibilities.

In the case of immigrant families, there must be specific, concrete steps to minimize the disadvantage of family organization types determined by migration: the absence of one of the parents should be compensated for, allowing the young person's guardian to take care of his or her arrival in the new country, and also to stay in constant contact with other institutions that address the young person's health, education and job placement. This is necessary, first of all, because job conditions are generally precarious and do not allow parents to take time off to handle childrearing obligations, and second, because the immigrant family cannot count on a family and social network for support (CES, 2002).

Social services context

With regard to professionals in social work, we believe it has become an unavoidable, ethical responsibility of the public administration to recognize the work carried out in com-

munities, and to reverse harmful subcontracting processes that hinder proper economic and professional recognition of the specialized training which is required, at both human and technical levels. As for further training and development which also is needed, it can be helpful to run specific training for those who are less prepared in the areas of *behavior characteristics and patterns* in adolescence and youth today, both overall and in a particular region; in the *ways certain risk behaviors present themselves,* linked to the need to affirm one's own identity; in *strategies for advancement and prevention* in youth groups; in *group processes and dynamics*; and in *communication and problem solving strategies.* This would make it possible to:

- give value to, strengthen, and make room for cultural creativity among the youth and their groups of membership
- To stay open and sensitive to the needs of youth and to keep open channels of participation for interpreting and understanding possible ongoing changes and to promote new solutions
- To become recognized mediators in conflict situations among youth, their groups, and in other settings
- To be ultimately responsible that the measures launched or developed by different institutions are integrated and linked together.

Finally, social workers need to recover their leading role and their confidence in their knowledge, abilities, and strategies for addressing social reality, which we feel has been robbed from them through the way the media handle certain youth phenomena. This media treatment has become a way of constructing social reality and of manipulating public agendas, going beyond anecdotal cases, such as that of "Latin gangs". Producing "rumors" creates a virtual reality which is impossible to contain, and which leaves all of us incompetent, since the suspicion that "there must be something else" only encourages further spreading of the rumor and the unfounded perception.

Educational context

Before indicating some strategies for intervention and prevention from the educational context, we would like to point out that this area currently needs fresh reinvestment from the other contexts, areas and institutions. This is not just reinvestment in terms of moneys, but

finding the social and political will to readdress its functions, responsibilities, autonomy and its relationship with the local community. In effect, the educational setting suffers significantly from the context; in most cases it is this context, not institutional dynamics, which is responsible for problem or deficit situations (Gottfredson, Wilson & Skroban Najaka, 2002). Problems stemming from the relationship between the educational setting and the context also include isolation, in part due to difficulties in communicating and cooperating with parents, and the cultural distance between teaching content and the interests or expectations of the young people (Graham & Utting, 1996; Gottfredson, Wilson & Skroban Najaka, 2002; Hawkins & Herrenkohl, 2003; Sellarés, 1997). We know that if the educational context is characterized by a too rigid or too lax organization, if it is ineffective in applying boundaries defined by discipline, if it does not offer alternatives for conflict resolution, if it is governed by contradictory values (negative selection practices based on comparisons between pupils, emphasis on academic aspects and little consideration given to personal and social education, unapproachable teachers, etc.), it can encourage an increase in deviant behaviors (Gottfredson, Wilson & Skroban Najaka, 2002; Hawkins & Herrenkohl, 2003). However, first of all, we feel that the educational context has been required to respond to—or alleviate—conflict situations arising from social changes over the last decade which are not its exclusive responsibility: in practice, education has been the only institution responsible for social insertion of immigrant youth, and the ultimate, single setting for "safe", "mandatory" socialization for youth in general (Lossef-Tillmanns, 1997). Second, education has suffered a process of wear and tear which has deeply undermined its legitimacy, due to being forced to defend itself from rationalization in a social context which tolerates contradictory messages—especially referring to justifying the use of violence—from merchant capitalist interests.

Steps taken in the educational setting must take into account its possibilities for prevention and resilience as a social community, a place for training in socio-cognitive competencies and in specific prevention. Thus, the educational setting, having such a predominant context for coexistence, must first of all intentionally encourage the development of relationship skills, paying special attention to construction of the "other", especially in terms of gender. Secondly, it can collaborate jointly with the family to promote diversifying the dimensions of comparison and self-realization. Thirdly, it also ought to contribute positive, stimulating identity models and support the development of life plans that can combine suitable realism with creativity. Intervention in the case of the school setting, therefore, would pursue:

- Development of critical thinking and reasoning skills
- Development of relationship and emotional expression skills
- The strengthening of creative resources for planning one's future
- Adjustment of academic content to expectations and needs
- Analysis and training in psycho-social processes of comparison and differentiation
- Analysis and training in inter- and intra-group dynamics
- Support for building a positive identity, especially gender identity
- Encouragement to take on prospects for the future
- Construction and adoption of a new concept of authority, in conjunction with other contexts and players
- Renew the content and design of activities with high emotional and intellectual involvement
- Integrate specific content in an educational project for citizenship[5].
- Link educational activity to the local environment

Programs known as social development, usually carried out in educational settings, have proven to be effective strategies for prevention of violence, especially if they address children of preschool or primary age (Gottfredson, Wilson & Skroban Najaka, 2002; Hawkins & Herrenkohl, 2003; United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). The objective of these programs is to improve social competency and social skills with one's classmates, promoting positive, cooperative behaviors and working specifically on controlling anger, moral development, adoption of a social perspective and resolution of problems or social conflict (Krug & colls., 2003). At the same time, preschool support programs which promote skills for scholastic success increase the likelihood of achieving successful academic results, and therefore, they strengthen the ties between young people and the educational institution, increasing academic benefit and self-esteem (Krug et al., 2003). In the secondary education setting, support programs which pair up students have proven effective in reducing violence within the school itself. Such programs seek to promote active listening, communication skills and support for problem solving (Cowie & Wallace, 2000). Along these lines, the educational institution can also support tutelage programs where students are paired with

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[5] We must mention that this text was presented at the Technical Conference on Violence and Youth Groups, held at the *Autónoma* University of Madrid and organized in conjunction with the Madrid Regional Department of Youth in November 2006, that is, when the public debate about including the subject of Education for Citizenship in the curriculum had not yet been initiated. Thus it is not our intent to align ourselves with any existing position in this debate.

older students, teachers, parents, local police agents or other members of the community who take on follow-up of the young person. The priority objective of these programs is to provide the young person with positive models and guides, through a sustained, stable relationship (Gottfredson, Wilson & Skroban Najaka, 2002; Thornton et al., 2000; United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). Each of the above programs, along with interventions that seek to promote parent participation and involvement in academic projects and activities, have proven to be effective in preventing violence and other deviant behaviors (Krug et al., 2003).

As we have pointed out above, we believe that many of the problems in educational insertion of immigrant youth are due to the lack of cooperation between public and private initiatives and educational institutions, making it difficult to take global, integrated measures. It therefore becomes necessary that the educational and job training function be taken on as an objective and a shared task from within different contexts, including from within the youth themselves and their group structures. Official, compulsory education is currently designed for adolescents and young people who can afford a long period of delay before taking on family or employment responsibilities, and therefore, it is not prepared to train those who are considering, wishing to, or needing to enter the job market as soon as possible. Not to mention the fact that immigrant youth bring with them different conceptions, demands, expectations and experiences with the educational institution, which can give rise to situations of disconnect, misunderstanding and therefore, early separation (Feixa, Porzio & Recio, 2006). At any rate, the problem of schooling adolescents between the ages of 14 and 16 does not only affect the immigrant population. In a recent report from the Spanish Ministry of Education and Culture (2007), the proportion of 15-year-olds who are repeating a grade in school is constantly growing, reaching troubling proportions which cannot be explained entirely by the increase in number of immigrants. In the case of immigrants under the age of 14, it is a matter of pacing the content to their abilities and to remedial work, so that academic successes make academics become a dimension for self-fulfillment and sense of self-worth, thus encouraging a connection with the education institution and motivating them to continue their training. Such remedial programs and also tutoring programs are strategies to be applied in this context. As for adolescents between the ages of 14 and 16, their educational options should be more flexible and oriented toward the individual's plans for the future (Hawkins & Herrenkohl, 2003). Vocational training, social guarantee workshops, hands-on training, training courses from the employment agencies adapted to 15- and 16-year-olds, courses offered by youth associations

and other social organizations, agreements with companies for training and job placement, are strategies which can effectively address adolescents' expectations and needs in this age group, whether they are immigrants or not. All this is based on the assumption that education is compulsory as a duty of institutions, not a duty of adolescents. Motivation to continue one's training, both in academic and professional terms, can be sought simultaneously through assistance from and collaboration with the job settings where adolescents begin their work life. We have noted that the most effective community programs aim to reach suitable educational goals and to foster training and employment (Goldstein et al., 1989; Sherman et al., 2002). Thus, differentiated, flexible educational itineraries can ensure that both objectives are more realistically pursued.

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