The psychology behind graffiti involvement

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Introduction

A person’s sense of belonging within society has been described as being a convergence of cognitions, behaviours and emotional affect as well as an environmental experience (Pretty et al., 2003). Moreover, the desire for a sense of place belonging within society is not constricted by age, gender, ethnicity or economic status. For, as Antonsich (2010) points out, both society’s ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ have an inherent longing to claim bodily, temporal and/or ephemeral ownership of a place within society. Once they have located this place, their sense of belonging is realised through their physical or cognitive occupation of that space. Such occupation may be permanent (i.e. residential) or, transitory in nature (Grillo et al., 2010). To identify with their selected place within society it is commonplace for insiders and outsiders to use language markers to indicate their occupancy of that space to other members. In the case of society’s insiders these markers typically include such things as residential addresses, business cards and clothing/accessories emblazoned with a club, church or organization’s logo. In contrast, society’s outsiders (e.g. graffiti crew members) often resort to monikers (e.g. cryptic tags) to inform fellow outsiders of their sense of place, belonging, or identity affiliations. For example, graffiti crews regularly use zip or postal code numbers (e.g. 5163) to identify their suburb of origin or tagging territory and letters to denote their place location (e.g. HU – Hills Unit; WC – Wanneroo Crew; AB – Aus[tralian]-Boys), tagging range (e.g. A2M – Ashfield-to-Midland; ACK – All-City-Krew; UTB – Up-Town-Boys), cultural origins (e.g. BP – Black Power; BWC Black-and-White-combined; ABC – All-Black-Crew), identity (BB – Bowl Boys; SK8S – Skaters; BK – Bike Krew), tagging times (ANC – All-Night-Crew; DNK – Day-Night-Crew; M2K – Morning-to-[K]night) and focus activity (FNC – Fun-Not-Crime; DF – Drunken Fools; DK – Dope-Krew; LBB – Lone-Bum-Boys; NSH – Non-Stop-Havoc; SDC – S[el]Duce-Crew) to name just a few. Such monikers demonstrate that while the crew’s tags can appear to be ‘mindless scribble’ to those outside of the graffiti subculture, to those within the graffiti subculture they are well known and informative.

Clearly, spoken, written and cryptic language markers hold explicit and implicit meanings that are understood and conveyed to those who use or observe them. Thus, societal insiders and outsiders have their own means of distinguishing themselves from other non-occupiers of
their selected place. In doing so, they generate a within group sense of identity which further contributes to their sense of place (Antonsich, 2010; Taylor and Khan, 2014). This chapter examines the psychological motivations of graffiti writers for initially selecting a societal ‘outsider’ (but graffiti subcultural ‘insider’) graffer social identity within the broader context of the psychological conceptualisations of people’s sense of place belonging, subcultural sense of place, sense of community and sense of connection. The chapter concludes by highlighting the motivations behind sanctioned graffiti artists’ drive for social inclusion (i.e. transitioning from a societal outsider to a societal insider).

A sense of place belonging

A sense of place belonging is used as a synonym for ‘identity’ and relates to the emotional feeling of being connected to a place and, by extension, feeling supported and included within the sub/cultural group, community or population cohort who also frequent that same space (Antonsich, 2010). In contrast, a lack of a sense of place belonging generates feelings of loneliness, isolation and societal alienation. The types of close links that facilitate a sense of place belonging occur in sub/cultural groups, communities or population cohorts wherein the membership share parallel interests or hold similar personal, religious, environmental, cultural or political values (Pretty et al., 2003). The ‘cementing’ of these place belonging links typically occur as a result of the trust bonds that form between members, for mutual trust is a major determinant in deciding who belongs (i.e. are insiders) and who does not belong (i.e. are outsiders) within any given sub/cultural group, community or population cohort (Antonsich, 2010).

Adolescence is a critical period for the development of a sense of place belonging because during this time young people attempt to differentiate themselves from their parents and find their place within the peer-group with which they wish to identify. Consequently, adolescents spend a large amount of time at this juncture in their life associating with and socialising with their peers (Dallago et al., 2009). Within the child development field, it is widely recognised that while no pathway is absolute or totally predetermining adolescents who come from stable family backgrounds and have parents who project mainstream beliefs and values tend to select a conforming social identity albeit somewhat differentiated from that of their parents (Carroll et al., 2009; Taylor, 2011; Wilkinson-Lee et al., 2011). Conversely, it is also acknowledged that adolescents, originating out of dysfunctional families and who have parents who hold beliefs and values that are not consistent with those of mainstream society, tend to emulate their parents’ non-conformity and, also tend to gravitate towards the company of other similarly situated youth (Taylor et al., 2010). To attract the attention of these non-conforming peers, the aspirant adolescent according to reputation enhancement theory (see Carroll et al., 2009) will often go to great lengths to be noticed. In this regard, adolescents seeking admission into one of the most readily accessible non-conforming youth cultures, the graffiti subculture, will place their ‘tag’ (i.e. a two to five letter moniker) in a place of visual prominence so as to maximise their potential for recognition. By doing so the aspirant youth announces their presence, provides proof of their audacity and stakes a momentary ownership claim of the place they tagged (Taylor, 2011).

The adrenaline ‘rush’ experienced from the risk-taking involved in completing such a tag without being caught accentuates the aspirant youth’s determination to continue with their attention-seeking tagging practices (Taylor, 2012). Once the aspirant youth has attained a certain level of visual recognition and gained a degree street kudos for their daring, they typically will be invited by an established graffer to join (dropped into) one or more graffiti crews. According to Taylor (2013), graffiti crews differ in size and purpose with large, to very large
crews (i.e. crews with 20–50 and 50–100+ respective members) tend to be loose configurations that typically engage in mass graffiti ‘bombing’ activities (i.e. blitzing an area with tags) and small graffiti crews (i.e. crews with 2–5 members) in contrast tend to be bound together by bonds of trust and camaraderie (Taylor et al., 2010; Taylor, 2013).

Hence, aspirant graffitists need to prove their value to a small crew before they are trusted, nominally accepted and included in all the crew’s machinations and activities. To gain this trust, an aspirant member is often set a graffiti task to complete. This task often involves a degree of law breaking (e.g. stealing paint, trespass, property damage). Indeed, it is through the act of proving their daring and commitment to the crew that aspirant young members gain full acceptance as well as in time the highly prized youth non-conforming ‘graffer’ (as opposed to ‘toy’ [learner]) street social identity. In order to increase their recognition within the graffiti crew as well as the wider graffiti subculture, newly accepted members as well as established graffers will endeavour to maintain or enhance their street cred by engaging in acts of increasing daring (e.g. tagging high or dangerous places or moving objects) (Taylor et al., 2012).

The awarding of a graffer identity and the obtaining of full acceptance within a graffiti crew and the wider graffiti subculture, however, is not readily given and as such aspirant members are required to prove themselves to be trustworthy. This proof is considered essential, given that if apprehended any ‘disclosure’ (ratting) by an untrustworthy new crew member to the police of the other crew members’ names has serious financial and imprisonment ramifications for the named members. Hence, there is often a process of negotiated deliberation that goes on between crew members while a new member’s trustworthiness is being assessed (Croucher, 2003).

Once a newly admitted member has proved themselves and has cemented their place within a graffiti crew, they then develop a sense of belonging to the crew. A strong sense of within crew belonging is associated with the ability of individual members to amass sufficient social capital resources so as to then be able to support the crew in times of collective adversity (e.g. a brawl with a rival crew) or individual need (e.g. police summons). Conversely, a poor sense of crew belonging is associated with the failure of individual members to amass sufficient levels of social capital resources so as to support the crew in times of collective adversity or individual need. (Social capital resources in the graffiti crew context being defined as individual members sustained access to the types of sociological support networks that glue the crew’s members so tightly together that they become so strongly bonded they develop such a sense of trust and collective wellbeing they are able to function effectively as a unit) (Rankin et al., 2000; Smith, 2011; Taylor, 2013; Taylor et al., 2014). Thus, it is plausible to assume that the receipt of social capital support resources not only enhances crew members’ sense of place affinity and sense of belonging, but also their psychological sense of wellbeing. Specifically, by providing the archetypical types of social capital support resources (e.g. reciprocal trust, information sharing, social engagement networks, camaraderie and protection) crews provide their members with an increased sense of purpose, self-worth and group identity (see Seamon, 1979; Hagerty et al., 1996; Warin et al., 2000; Steger and Kashdan, 2009; Smith, 2011). Acceptance over time facilitates the establishment of an emotional attachment to the crew and cements the crew members’ sense of place belonging.

Although the terms ‘sense of belonging’ and ‘sense of place affinity’ remain definitionally vague and indeterminable in relation to whether a sense of belonging is the basis for a sense of place affinity or vice versa, however, both terms encompass the emotional dimensions of attachment and identity status (Antonsich, 2010). Attachment, being conceptualised as the facet of feeling ‘at home’ and feeling ‘safe’ within a given place, because these feelings are engendered by insider members of a sub/cultural group, community or population cohort, then these feelings
typically generate a belief among insider members that this is the place where they belong (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Antonsich, 2010). Safe, in the physical sense of the word, relates to the protective social capital support resource of knowing that another crew member will literally ‘have your back’ in a fight and, in the cognitive sense of feeling secure in the knowledge that if a member of your graffiti crew is apprehended by police, then the unwritten code of silence that binds the crew together will prohibit the apprehended member from informing on the rest of the crew (Taylor, 2013).

A feeling of being safe and at home within a crew is not just a personal issue, but is also a whole crew membership issue. For the social capital support resource of providing members with social networks, allows members to establish and sustain strong friendship connections. In doing so the former non-conforming adolescent outsider becomes both an accepted crew and subculture insider. The immediate mental health benefit of this crew acceptance is it provides graffers with a supportive and disclosing environment in which to discuss personal, relational, sexual and monetary issues, and, thus, relieves their latent anxieties. However, acceptance within a graffiti crew and the wider graffiti subcultural community comes at a cost. For, in hanging out with crew members who through their engagement in illegal graffiti writing consistently break trespass and property damage laws, the chances that the newly admitted members will emulate their mates’ illegal acts is greatly increased (Taylor et al., 2012). This likelihood is enhanced in crews that operate under a hierarchical leadership system for in such instances coercion is often used as a means of maintaining control. Indeed, the use of coercive control is not restricted to the leaders of graffiti crews for aggression and violence are commonplace in many subcultural entities where there is an unequal power distribution (Nijhof et al., 2010; Van Ryzin and Dishion, 2013; Taylor et al., 2014).

Individual members of a sub/cultural group, community or population entity as well as the group itself benefit too from the admittance of new members as each new member broadens and strengthens the entity’s collective skill set. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, this membership comes with the reciprocal expectation that individual members as well as the collective entity will adhere not only to the micro group’s mores of behaviour, but also those of the overarching sub/cultural group (Newman et al., 2007; Jack, 2010; Taylor et al., 2010). In relation to the micro (small) crews, their adherence to the wider graffiti subculture’s more of behaviour reinforces both the individual member’s and the crew’s sense of identity and place belonging (Putnam, 2000; Barry, 2006; Deuchar, 2009; Taylor et al., 2014).

A subcultural sense of place

When people attach an emotional meaning to a place, then they make sense of the larger undifferentiated space that surrounds that place (Jack, 2010). A sub/cultural group, community or population cohort’s sense of collective belonging is conveyed by a collection of people occupying a shared physical or ephemeral space, as well as the entity’s collective identity as being the users of that space. Moreover, through claiming temporary ownership of a place, the occupiers further reinforce their collective sense of ‘us’ the insiders and the ‘we’ who belong to this place and, conversely the notion of ‘them’ the outsider ‘others’ who do not belong. By tagging surfaces with their own and/or their crew’s moniker graffitists affirm on three levels (i.e. affective [emotional], conative [behavioural] and cognitive [perceptual]) that the tagged place belongs to ‘us’ for ‘we’ have claimed transient ownership of this space (Smith, 2011). When a tagger develops such a three tier attachment to a place, then during the time they occupy that space they typically experience a sense of oneness with both the place and the people who co-tag that space. This sense of oneness facilitates interactions between graffers and
creates a group sense of identity and dependence which are the foundation blocks for developing a sense of community (Pretty et al., 2003).

As alluded to earlier, the term ‘sense of place’ is not necessarily location limited, the term also captures the intangible and symbolic personal, social and cultural experiences which people have as a result of their interactions with their selected place (Pretty et al., 2003) and the behavioural desires they associate with their occupancy of that space (Stedman, 2003). Place attachment or place identity is a process of developing both a sense of self in relation to place as well as a communal social identity. Collectively, over time and with repeated positive interactions with a place, people develop a sense of affection for that place and, in the process become bonded to it (Dallago et al., 2009). It is this bond that anchors a person’s self-identity and feelings of place belonging (Morgan, 2010). However, just as people change over the course of their lifetime so too can their sense of place belonging and their sense of community.

**Sense of community**

According to Gusfield (1975), a sense of community occurs on two dimensions, the first being relational (i.e. the sense of belonging) and the second territorial (i.e. sense of place). Whereas, previously a community was considered to involve some form of physical interaction between members (Chavis et al., 1986), since the advent of new online social networking sites the physical requirement to meet is redundant as communities can now form and engage in cyberspace. Indeed, graffitists have embraced social networking and as a result the subculture has morphed into a global community.

Once people see themselves as belonging to a community, they form ties and interact socially with other people within the community. In this way, they become an integral and functioning part of the community (Kissane and McLaren, 2006). While no clear conceptualisation or construct of sense of community exists (Reich, 2010) within the field of Community Psychology, Sarason’s (1974) definition of sense of community is broadly accepted as being a shared perception of similarity among the community’s members, an acknowledgement of their interdependence, and a realisation that the coherence of the entity (and the social capital resource that it dispenses) is only maintainable by the insiders adherence to the structures which bind the entity together. In other words there is a united belief among the community’s members that they belong together and that they will join together to support each other in times of adversity (Hodgetts et al., 2010; Tonts and Atherley, 2010; Smith, 2011). A strong sense of community typically is comprised of a number of interrelated micro, meso, exo and macro social systems which when they work together optimise the entity’s members’ sense of satisfaction, wellbeing and efficacy (Sum et al., 2009; Huitt, 2009; Smith, 2011). Indeed, the term ‘sense of community’ encompasses the common interests, cultural values, affiliations and the multiple (micro, meso, exo and macro) associations which bond a group or groups of people together.

One mark of a bonded community (i.e. a community where members benefit from the cooperation and assistance of its members) is that the individual members or groups who have the greater abilities and stocks of social capital resources support those with lesser abilities (Semenza and March, 2009; Lewicka, 2010). When this interdependent sense of community exists, characteristically community members (individuals and groups) hold an expectation that their needs will be met and that they will receive the social capital support resources they require (Pretty et al., 2003). As a result there is an incumbency on the part of the person or group receiving the support resources to invest in the entity by contributing to the community’s cohesivity and wellbeing. This cohesivity usually is built on trust and cemented by adherence...
to the community’s mores of behaviour (Hosmer, 1995; Das and Teng, 2004; Mannarini and Fedi, 2009). Within the graffiti community, the predominant more that binds graffers, crews and the wider graffiti community together is the subculture’s strict ‘no snitching’ street code of silence (Taylor, 2013). This no snitch code of silence is embedded within the hip-hop gangsta rap music genre, whose lyrics not only glorify criminality and hegemonic violence, but also instruct listeners to not ‘snitch’ on each other and furthermore, exhort its devotees to exact retribution on those individuals who do ‘rat’ (inform) on their mates (Anderson, 1999; Kubrin, 2005; Taylor, 2013). As a consequence, orchestrated retribution has become a common means by which street communities brutally enforce their ‘no snitch’ code of silence (Harris, 2007; Taylor, 2013). Indeed, within the graffiti community crew members are under no misconception whatsoever that if they are found to have collaborated with police and ratted (i.e. informed) on their fellow graffers, they will be labelled an informer, ostracised, and on their release from police custody will be subjected to (often violent) retribution (Tafler, 2000; Taylor, 2013).

Communities are not static entities, people join and people leave, so their membership is in a state of continual change and renewal. A tipping point for graffitists in terms of their willingness to remain part of the graffiti community typically arrives around the time they enter adulthood. For it is at this stage that young people begin to contemplate their future. A future that is comprised of adult responsibilities; for example, obtaining a source of income to pay for their living costs and fulfilling the time requirements and personal commitments that are needed to foster and sustain intimate partner relationships. Added motivational clarity to change their life-style also comes from the increasingly harsh adult financial and penal penalties that many governments put in place to deal with what their mainstream populace deems to be acts of graffiti vandalism (i.e. the unauthorised and illegal written, scratched, marked, sprayed or affixed defacement of property) (Taylor et al., 2012). Hence, during early adulthood some graffitists leave the graffiti community to resume a life within the mainstream, others with limited artistic talent and limited scholastic skills gravitate towards a life of un/under employment or criminality. However, for those graffers with street honed artistic skills, a third option has in recent years opened up, namely, the chance to adopt the more publically palatable and ‘legitimate’ identity of a sanctioned graffiti artist, an identity which attracts a degree of mainstream community respect along with a potential source of income (Taylor, 2012). Some graffitists making this re-entry into mainstream society choice though appear to oscillate for a period of time between the illegal graffiti community and the sanctioned graffiti artist community. In some cases, their willingness to re-enter the mainstream community and abide by its laws is contingent on the sanctioned graffiti artist gaining the respect, mentorship and financial support that they are seeking from mainstream society (Taylor, 2014). For if they are ‘dissed’ or rebuffed, or unable to secure a financial reward for their artwork then these transitioning young adults will return to the security and camaraderie of the illegal graffiti community. The choice to remain within the illegal graffiti community or to become a mainstream sanctioned graffiti artist is further complicated by some subcultural graffitists’ belief that by selling graffiti to mainstreamers sanctioned graffiti artists are also selling out the very essence of the graffiti subculture, namely, that of being an art form which challenges society’s mores.

The conundrum for mainstream society is that in recognising sanctioned graffiti artists as respected members of the mainstream community and providing them with the necessary social capital support resources and financial rewards, they need to sustain their sanctioned artwork, then they evoke the ire of the citizenry opposed to graffiti. For such individuals are quick to point out that in paying sanctioned graffiti artists you are rewarding them for the years of illegal graffiti they wrote on the streets while they were honing their present artistic skills. Thus, solving
this conundrum is not easy. What is clear though is that in order for former graffitists to make the switch to legal sanctioned graffiti society needs to help foster a connection between them and the mainstream community if a compromise to this conundrum is to be found (Newman et al., 2007). This is no easy task given that a sizeable proportion of mainstream society resents the presence of graffiti on the streets and questions why taxpayer dollars should be spent on legitimising graffiti under the banner of urban or street art. Thus, a major challenge for society is how to build links between the sanctioned graffiti artist and the anti-graffiti lobby, sanctioned graffiti artists and youth mentors as well as put in place pro-social legal pathways into sanctioned graffiti art for disenfranchised youth. This pathway has to be inclusionary for it is competing with an illegal, but cohesive crew subculture, which is able to provide disenfranchised graffitists with the social capital support resources that they need to deal with their non-conforming lives.

**Sense of connection**

Social cohesion among the occupiers of a physical, online or ephemeral place occurs when collectively a group of insiders establish a sense of solidarity with their co-occupier of that space and with outsiders (Goodenow, 1993; Steger and Kashdan, 2009). When a sense of connection and a sense of place belonging co-occur, then a sense of wellness develops and it is this sense of connection with others that provides the types of mental health benefits which contribute to psychological well-being (Cemalcilar, 2010). Indeed, Cemalcilar suggests that the mental health benefits of achieving a sense of connection with others is a lower internalised sense of alienation, loneliness and hostility, which in turn helps generate positive attitudes, pro-social behaviours, interpersonal associations and enduring friendships. These positive attributes act as a buffer (particularly among young people) against negative life experiences (e.g. criticism, bullying, rejection), and generate the emotional capacity and resilience young people need individually and collectively to deal with life’s challenging or adverse events (Ladd et al., 1997; Ladd and Troop-Gordon, 2003; Walker et al., 2014). Although, with the growth of the Internet concerns have been raised as to whether a virtual online sense of connection is fostering in the I-Generation a greater sense of individualism as opposed to the traditional sense of collective community (Reich, 2010). Thus, further research is needed to examine both young people’s conforming and non-conforming sense of community.

**Summary**

Seeking an adult identity, a sense of personal belonging, place and community with others typically begins around the onset of adolescence. At this stage, the socially conforming or non-conforming identity that the adolescent chooses in many ways orientates their future life trajectory (Pereira and Pooley, 2007). Providing sanctioned graffiti art pathways back into the mainstream community for graffitists is one way young people with demonstrable art skills and proven tenacity of spirit can enrich society. The adoption of such a social inclusion pathway is less costly to society than the alternative pathway of graffiti removal, policing, prosecution and incarceration costs, graffiti-related injury health costs and arguably the lost taxable income on artwork that if written legally could have possibly been sold. Although others may argue that mainstream societal support resources are better spent on providing assistance to adolescents when they first show signs of ostracising themselves (or being ostracised by their peers) from the mainstream school community and start seeking a sense of identity among the cohort of non-conforming street youth. What is clear, however, and needs to be kept in mind by politicians, lawmakers
and other agents and institutions of social control, is that non-conforming young people involved in the graffiti subculture are no different from their mainstream conforming age-mates in so far as they too desire a sense of place, belonging, community and connection within and to society.

**Note**

1 Although this discussion can probably be applied to street artists, the focus here is on graffiti writers.

**References**


Taylor, M.F. and Khan, U. (2014). What works and what does not work in reducing juvenile graffiti offending? A comparison of changes that occurred in the frequency of persistent graffitists’ patterns of


