INTERNATIONALISING THE STUDY OF GANG MEMBERSHIP: VALIDATION ISSUES FROM LATIN AMERICA

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ABSTRACT
Developing valid measures of gang membership for self-report surveys is a challenging task in comparative cross-national research. In this article we use the Venezuelan case to assess the validity of the Eurogang indicators of gang membership. Based on focus groups with adolescents and the results from two sweeps of the International Self-Report Survey of Juvenile Delinquency we identify problems in the content and construct validities of the Eurogang items. We propose an alternative set of measures for cross-national studies of gang membership, focusing on a group's reputation for violence (or broader criminal behaviour).

Key words: gang membership, self-report surveys, validity, Latin America

Introduction

Asking adolescents to report on their involvement in gang activity is a very common component of contemporary surveys on juvenile delinquency. Indeed, measuring 'gang membership' now appears to surpass – in quantity, if not in depth – observational studies of gangs. The theoretical importance of this exercise is based on the opportunity to include measures of individual gang participation as an independent or dependent variable in quantitative explanatory frameworks. For example, a consistently reported finding is that rates of individual delinquent behaviour are significantly higher when respondents also report belonging to a gang (e.g., Thornberry *et al*. 2003; Decker, *et al.* 2013), although the interpretation of this finding is subject to some debate.[1] The same finding also lends weight to the pragmatic interest in estimating the prevalence of gang activity, and the risk factors associated with it, as a prelude to developing gang intervention programmes (e.g., Gilman et al. 2014).

However, the fact that criminologists have been unable to agree on the definition of a gang indicates some challenges for measuring gang membership in surveys. After all, a cardinal requisite for seeking validity is that measurement 'be guided by a clear conception of the construct to be measured' (Guion 2011: 182). Absent this clear conception, it is difficult to defend survey items in terms of their operational value.[2] In the U.S. – the birthplace and for long the near-exclusive domain of gang studies (Weerman and Esbensen, 2005) - researchers have usually asked respondents one or more explicit questions about 'belonging to a gang'. They have defended this strategy partly on the grounds of construct validity, by showing that gang membership, thus measured, is significantly

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[1] Most researchers interpret gang membership as the cause, and higher delinquency rates as the effect; however, Katz and Jackson-Jacobs (2004) argue for the inverse interpretation.

[2] The literature on measurement is replete with varied classifications of the dimensions of validity (Newton and Shaw 2014). Here, we focus on two of those dimensions, which have traditionally figured prominently. 'Content validity' denotes the degree to which specific measures are judged to capture the key characteristics, and only the key characteristics, of the concept being studied. 'Construct validity' refers to the association between the measure of interest and a variety of other measures, which range broadly from equivalents to correlates. We recognise that a full validation exercise requires consideration of additional dimensions, such as 'criterion validity' (the extent to which a survey measure is associated with an external and validated measure of the same phenomenon), and 'consequential validity' ('the value implications and social consequences of interpreting and using [these measures] in particular ways' [Messick 1989:6]).

associated with other variables of theoretical significance (e.g., Thornberry et al. 2003; Boxer et al. 2015). They have also made arguments for criterion validity, pointing to the overlap between self-reports of gang membership and the police's identification of gang members (Curry 2000). Similarly, Decker *et al.* (2014) reported that self-nomination as a current or former gang member is a strong predictor of 'embeddedness' in gangs, as measured by other survey items. In general, these findings support Thornberry *et al.*'s (2003: 22) claim that '[US] Adolescents appear to know what gangs are and whether they are a member of a gang' (Esbensen *et al.* 2001; Gibson *et al*. 2009).

Yet if concerns about measurement arise in relation to survey research on gangs in English-speaking countries, they are augmented when the empirical gaze is broadened to include other linguistic and cultural regions. Is there an equivalent word for criminology's 'gangs'[3] or are there merely several possible approximations? Is group criminality organised in ways that include criminology's 'gangs', or are those 'gangs' nowhere to be found? These are fundamental questions for the international comparative study of gangs. They became immediately evident when U.S. gang researcher Malcolm Klein met with researchers from Western Europe to design and carry forward a project for studying gangs in Europe (Klein *et al.* 2001). Members of the resulting 'Eurogang Project' were quick to point out that self-report items referring to gangs (in whatever language) might well evoke, in the minds of respondents, phenomena that were far removed from the sort of delinquent youth group that international criminologists had in mind when using the term. Indeed, much of the early discussion between Klein and European researchers revealed that the word 'gang' evoked stereotypical images of an American gang that was assumed to exist in the U.S. and to be absent in Europe. Klein (2001) noted that there was a paradox here: many gangs of interest to U.S. criminology did not match this stereotypical image, such that denials of a European gang problem could well have overlooked local delinquent youth groups that were similar to at least some of the various types of U.S. gang identified by U.S. researchers (Maxson and Klein 1995).

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[3] Katz and Jackson-Jacobs (2004) refer to 'the criminologists' gang' – an important recognition that academic uses of the term, however fuzzy, may differ from popular conceptions of the gang.

This debate reflected a potential problem with the content validity of self-nomination as a 'gang' member. The Eurogang solution to this problem (reviewed in detail below) was to clarify their conception of the gang and develop six indicators of gang membership that, without mentioning the word 'gang,' could be put to respondents. Those who responded to all the indicators in terms that were congruent with the researchers' definition of the gang would be classed as gang members. This indicator-based approach to identifying gang members has some significant advantages. One of its strengths lies in the attempt to develop survey items that are easily understood by adolescents, and easily answered (e.g., 'Which of the following best describes the ages of people in your group?'). Hopefully, this will increase the criterion validity of self-reported information. Secondly, these indicators are less linguistically complex than the word 'gang,' thereby facilitating measurement and comparison of gang membership across different countries and cultures. Indeed, the Eurogang indicators were a natural candidate for inclusion in the largest comparative study of juvenile delinquency to date, the International Self-Report Survey of Juvenile Delinquency (ISRD). Thus, the Eurogang items were included in the second (2006-7) and third (2013-15) sweeps of the ISRD.

In those sweeps, the ISRD went beyond Europe and the USA to include countries from the Caribbean and South America. Venezuela, the country that occupies our attention in this article, participated in both. Its social, cultural and criminological characteristics are sufficiently different from those found in Europe and the USA to prompt continued attention to the task of achieving cross-national equivalence in measures of juvenile delinquency, including membership in gangs. Thus, in this paper, we continue the vein of critical comparative inquiry piloted by the Eurogang project, but now we apply it to the Eurogang indicators themselves.

Our study proceeds in several stages. First, we outline the Eurogang definition of a gang, the indicators used to measure gang membership, and some problems with those indicators. Some of the problems have been raised by participants in the Eurogang project, but one concerns the ambiguous role of a *seventh* Eurogang item which includes the word 'gang'. Second, we use the Venezuelan experience to assess the content validity of the Eurogang indicators. We provide an

overview of what is known about delinquent youth groups in Venezuela, among other things seeking to emphasize the dissimilarities with several other Latin American countries (such as El Salvador, Honduras or Colombia) where, for one reason or another, the 'gang' has a more visible presence. This serves as important contextual information for an assessment of the Eurogang indicators of gang membership. Drawing mainly on focus groups conducted with Venezuelan adolescents, we identify several problems with the content validity of the Eurogang indicators - problems derived from Eurocentric conceptions of the adolescent experience. Third, using Venezuelan survey data we examine the construct validity of the Eurogang indicators from three different perspectives: the overlap between different configurations of the indicators themselves, the overlap between the Eurogang measures and other measures of group delinquency, and the associations between the Eurogang measures and commonly cited risk factors for gang membership. On all three counts, we find construct validity to be relatively low.

In sum, while Eurogang researchers sought to remove the ethnocentrism inherent in survey items that include the word 'gang', they only managed to dilute it. Using the Venezuelan experience *not* as a special case but as representative of a different cultural region,[4] we propose that indicators of gang membership be designed in even more generic terms in order to improve cross-cultural equivalence in measurement. To illustrate this approach we focus on group identity, which is a key concern (and problem) for the Eurogang project. We develop a set of items which, we argue, will increase the validity and comparability of adolescents' reports about their group experiences and facilitate the cross-cultural study of gangs.

The Eurogang Framework: Concept and Indicators

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[4] That culture varies within and between countries is a truism. Characterising those differences, particularly at a global scale, is a challenge. Qualitative approaches have developed very broad typologies such as Hofstede's ([1980]2001) distinction between 'collectivist' and 'individualist' cultures. Quantitative approaches paint a more complex picture (e.g., Inglehart and Carballo, 1997). However, from either perspective Venezuela is located in a different cultural region to that which spawned research on gangs, and the self-report survey method.

Internationalising the Study of Gang membership…

Prior to the Eurogang project, European research on gangs had been sparse, partly because gangs did not figure strongly in the public mind. From the start of the project, however, European researchers worked actively to shape the study of gangs according to their own experiences. Most importantly, they noted that the term 'gang' does not translate easily into many European languages. For example, *bande* (French) or *jeugdbende* (Dutch) look similar to the word gang but might not refer to exactly the phenomenon that North American researchers have in mind when talking about gangs (Esbensen and Maxson 2012: 7; van Gemert 2012). Yet project members eschewed cultural relativism: they did not equate linguistic variation with incommensurability. Instead, they devoted considerable effort to the development of a definition of the gang that would be fit for comparative purposes. This reflected the project's commitment to systematic comparative research that would facilitate the integration of results from many international sites (Weerman et al., 2009).

In defining the gang, Eurogang members identified specific dimensions of group delinquency that in their view would merit the academic, if not social, label of gang: 'A street gang (or troublesome youth group corresponding to a street gang elsewhere) is any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of its group identity' (Esbensen and Maxson 2012: 6). These dimensions – group, durability, street orientation, illegal activity and identity – were further specified in a youth survey questionnaire that was developed for comparative cross-national research on gang membership. Six items were designed to distinguish gangs and gang membership from other patterns of delinquent association (see Table 1).

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Respondents are considered to be gang members if they have a group of friends aged between twelve and 25 which spends a lot of time in public places, has existed for at least three months and accepts and participates in illegal activity. Table 1 also shows a seventh item asking respondents if they consider their group of friends to be a gang. In the words of the project coordinators: 'This item is not necessary to determine gang membership according [to] the

consensus definition, but can be seen as a contrast to the six preceding questions' (Weerman at el. 2009: 30). While measuring gang membership with the first six items is a strategy designed to avoid mention of the word 'gang' and has been used by some researchers to assess gang membership (e.g., Matsuda *et al.* 2012), these items do not explicitly address the group's identity, which is also part of the Eurogang definition. Thus, other researchers have included the seventh item as a core indicator of gang membership (e.g., Blaya and Gatti 2010; Haymoz and Gatti 2010; Gatti *et al.* 2011; Moravcová 2012).[5] 'Gangs' have returned, as it were, by the back door.

While the effort expended to define and measure gang membership has produced a tangible product which has been incorporated into international research agendas, the Eurogang framework has also garnered some critical observations from project members, most notably from the University of Manchester research group. Based on extended ethnographic work in a northern English city, Aldridge *et al.* (2012) found that what otherwise looked to be a gang did not have the 'street orientation' envisaged by the Eurogang project, its members meeting mainly at different homes and apartments. What kept them off the street was partly the weather, partly a very active police presence, and partly an increasing engagement in online activity. A strict application of the Eurogang definition would have excluded this group from consideration. Aldridge *et al.* also noted that the Eurogang definition would include some groups that '(arguably) we would not wish to consider as gangs' (2012:40) because of the nature of their illegal activity: pot smokers who meet in public parks, illegal ravers, and clubbers who consume illegal drugs. The authors questioned whether the reference to 'illegal things' is sufficiently precise to capture the criminality that researchers envision when speaking of 'gangs' and whether cross-national variations in the il/legality of some deviant behaviours confound comparisons.

These comments represented a rather negative assessment of the criterion validity of the Eurogang measurement framework. But they also revealed ongoing questions about the appropriate

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[5] In fact, use of the Eurogang indicators has been rather idiosyncratic. For example, Gatti *et al.* did not include the second Eurogang item (age of respondent's group of friends) in their identification of gang members.

definition of a gang, specifically in relation to the role of identity. The authors argued that Eurogang

item 5 (doing illegal things is accepted by the group) had at least two different and conflicting

interpretations of its meaning.[6] Additionally, they proposed that the identity of the gang is founded

on a reputation for violence or for a willingness to resort to it, even if rarely used. Their primary

justification was ostensive rather than analytical: 'this "reputation for violence" criterion actually

distinguished what we would want to consider the "gang" from the "non-gang" groups we observed'

(49). The authors did not develop a discussion of the theoretical significance of a reputation for

violence (e.g., in terms of labelling theory) or consider alternatives to this definition (such as a

reputation for serious criminal behaviour, rather than only for violence). They also commented that,

because reputations are partly constructed from without, a self-report survey could only capture

respondents' assessments of whether or not their group had a reputation. And they recognised that

further thought needed to be given to additional specifications, such as how to distinguish between

youth groups and organised crime groups.

Despite these observations, no modifications have so far been proposed to the Eurogang

framework. Instead, methodological attention has focused on the extent to which different

strategies for measuring gang membership produce dis/similar results. Using survey data from a

multi-site, multi-wave, project in the United States, Matsuda *et al.* (2012) compared the prevalence

of gang membership as estimated by the first six Eurogang indicators on the one hand, and the

seventh indicator on the other. In their comparisons, they also included a version of the standard

'self-nomination' question used in US research (e.g., 'Are you now in a gang?'). As is to be expected

(Weerman and Esbensen 2005), different measurement strategies produced different results: only

9% of all respondents classified as gang members by any method ('any gang') were identified by all

three forms of measurement; conversely, 68% of 'any gang' respondents were identified by only one

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[6] Interpretation 1: illegal activity is acceptable for the group. Interpretation 2: the group knows the difference between right and wrong.

method.[7] As Matsuda *et al.* point out (2012:25), 'From a policy perspective, these varying prevalence rates suggest that definition is important. The magnitude of the "gang problem" varies substantially by definition'.[8]

One might also add that these varying prevalence rates are of methodological significance: what phenomenon external to the survey is being measured in each case? This query about the criterion-related validity of the different measures of gang membership is hard to answer when the only empirical referents available are the survey results. Instead, Matsuda *et al.* assessed the construct validity of those measures by exploring their relationships with other variables in the survey. They did not explicate a theoretical framework for their analysis, but focused on commonly accepted correlates of gang membership (delinquency, substance use, victimization, parental monitoring, etc.) for which they reported significant results. Although they reported some non-significant results – for example, gang membership was not associated with family structure – they did not discuss these in terms of construct validity. For their part, studies using ISRD-2 data have also found a higher prevalence of drug use, delinquency and victimization among those defined as gang members, but they have not discussed the findings in terms of the construct validity of the Eurogang items (e.g., Blaya and Gatti 2010; Gatti *et al.* 2011).

Looking for the Criterion: Gangs in Latin America and Venezuela

As a recent review of research in the region indicates (Rodgers and Baird 2015), a longstanding and growing body of studies can be assembled under the heading of 'gang research' in Latin America. These reveal a number of interesting things. First, across the region gangs have acquired varied salience as a social problem and, consequently, as a research topic. Concern is strongest in Central

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[7] See Esbensen et al. (2001) for a similar analysis focusing on different strategies for measuring self-nominated gang membership. Weerman and Esbensen (2005) provide an extended discussion of the impact of different definitions of gang and different sources of data and methods of observation on the measurement of gang membership and the description of gangs' characteristics.
[8] A natural corollary to this kind of comment would be a discussion of the consequential validity of the different measures of gang membership.

America and generally declines as one moves south from there, with intermediate attention in countries like Colombia and Brazil but relatively low levels of preoccupation in the Southern Cone (Argentina, Chile, Uruguay). Second, there is a marked abundance of terms referring to delinquent and organized crime groups, e.g., *maras* in El Salvador, *bandas* and *parches* in Colombia, and *comandos* in Brazil. This poses challenges for establishing semantic equivalence between these terms, or with the English word gang. Third, observational studies of gangs dominate in empirical research; only the Central American studies by Rubio (e.g., 2003; 2006; 2007) use self-report surveys to examine perceptions of, pathways to, and consequences of gang involvement. Working in countries where gangs are a significant social problem, Rubio employed widely used terms (*mara* in El Salvador; *pandilla* in Panamá) in the surveys and did not consider issues relating to the validity of the measurement. However, his findings show significant associations between gang affiliation, risk factors and rates of delinquency, which *could* be taken as evidence in favour of construct validity.

As Rodgers and Baird (2015) observe, there is a paucity of research on gangs in Venezuela, and this in a country that has some of the highest rates of violence in the region. While crime is nowadays recognised by Venezuelans as a leading social problem (Latinobarómetro, 2015), youth gangs occupy a vague and minor role in popular thinking about the characteristics and causes of delinquency. There has been very little extended observation of delinquent youth groups and most research relies on interviews and testimonial accounts. While an early study, based on interviews with young males and females, purported to identify the classic characteristics of gangs as described by Thrasher for the U.S., a close reading of the evidence suggests that informants were talking about groups of delinquents, but not necessarily gangs (Mateo and González, 1998).

Subsequent research has similarly reported the experiences narrated by young offenders, but their focus is really on that archetype of Venezuelan culture known as the *malandro*. This is a label for the individual, not the group, which is used as a moralistic epithet by most and embraced as a delinquent identity by a very few (Zubillaga, 2007). The term most widely used for group delinquency is *banda*, a longstanding trope used by the police and crime reporters to refer to

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assortments of suspects arrested for specific crimes. More recently, the word *pandilla* has also

gained some currency, arguably as a result of public attention to the *maras* in Central America and

of a continuing focus on gangs in internationally sourced news and entertainment media. Reflecting

on extensive testimonials from three current or former offenders, Moreno et al. (2008: 255)

observed that the *banda* (their term, not that of their informants) represented 'a small group linked

by a feeling that is momentary, short-term, fleeting and changeable but very strong….There is never

a commitment to someone.' Their conclusion resonates with the individualism and instability which

is apparent in other testimony and also underlines the absence, in Venezuela, of types of gangs

described in other Latin American countries (Rodgers and Baird 2015). While the Venezuelan studies

leave no doubt that much delinquent behaviour is not carried out by lone offenders, very little is

known about the group dimension of that behaviour.

The Eurogang Indicators: Content Validity for Venezuela

In order to explore the content validity of the Eurogang indicators, some months after the

ISRD-3 survey had been completed three of the authors organised six focus groups to explore

adolescents' understandings of some of the key terms in these indicators.[9] Attention focused

particularly on the meanings attached to 'friends', *bandas*, and *pandillas*, and indirectly on

conceptions of illegal behaviour.

When asked what groups of friends they might have, participants described a number of

characteristics. They spoke of friends as peers with whom they spent time in shared activities:

They are people who are always together. They get out of school and they are

together; they go out somewhere. That's a group of friends. (C2:3)[10]

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[9] The focus groups were conducted by Rodríguez, Pérez Santiago and Crespo in November 2014. The six groups were distributed to match the sampling strategy employed in ISRD-3, involving three school years (7th, 8th and 9th grade), two cities (Caracas, Mérida) and two school types (public, private). None of these groups had participated in the ISRD-3 survey in 2013. The average number of participants per group was ten, and the average length of each session was 35 minutes. The focus group discussions were recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

[10] The letters and numbers code the focus group and participant.

Importantly, these groups of friends could form wherever young people spent a significant period of time:

> It's mainly where you are, because at school, for example, you have your school friend. If you're at home, it's a neighbour. (C1:5)

The groups could be large:

> 1: For example, I hang out with 25.
>
> 5: There's about six of us.
>
> 3: The whole school. (C2)

But not all of the members necessarily came together at the same time:

> ……we're a large group, you see, but it's not that everyone always goes everywhere…. because some can and some can't. (M2:7)

Additionally, new friends could be made quite casually:

> And in any place, because if you go out you get new friends and you get to know more people, and so on. (C1:5)

But within these groups of varying sizes and locations, some important distinctions were made in terms of intimacy:

> For me there are two types of groups of friends. There's a group of friends that you have grown up with, with whom you can speak of long friendships. And the other group of friends I'd call casuals, who are like those you go to school with or for other reasons. (M3:1)
>
> For me, a group of friends is like a brother in the good times and the bad, whatever happens. We fall out, the next day we'll talk, we'll love each other…and, well, that…[chuckles] (C1:2)

Close friends were seen as supportive and tolerant:

> If you don't want to do something, friends can't make you do it, because they're
>
> supposed to be your friends, and they're not going to make you do something
>
> you don't want to do. (C1:9)

Acquaintances, by contrast, were not always to be trusted:

> Because friends can betray you. (M1:9)
>
> Because there's a lot of people, at least, who are friends today but might they not
>
> be friends tomorrow. (M2:6)

Amid the clichés and generalizations that these young people put forward, there might be little that looks different to the sorts of thing that would be said by adolescents in many other societies. Yet the small but growing interest in the anthropology of friendship suggests that the definitions and dynamics of friendship vary across cultures, entwined as they are with the relative un/importance of kin, mobility, instrumental relationships, personal autonomy and so on (Bell and Coleman 1999; Smart 1999; Keller 2004; French *et al.* 2005). What interests us here is the variety of meanings that seem to come to mind for Venezuelan adolescents when they talk about friends (cfr. Barcellos Rezende, 1999). When asked - via Eurogang Item 1 - whether they have a group of friends, which group(s) might they be thinking of when responding affirmatively?

Additionally, participants described some members of their peer groups engaging in unacceptable or wrongful behaviour: fights, bullying, smoking, drinking, doing drugs, minor theft (usually in the classroom) and even talking in street slang. These activities range from legal (street slang, smoking, drinking) through the problematic but not criminal (drug use, bullying, fights) to criminal (theft), and underline Aldridge *et al.'s* (2012) point that conceptions of illegal behaviour (the focus of the Eurogang indicators) vary from country to country and may include transgressions that do not fit with researchers' images of gangs. Participants often mentioned that these activities occurred within their group, but also stated that they did not get involved and did not feel group pressure to get involved.

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In exploring the meanings of the two terms that in Venezuela come closest to the word gang (*banda* and *pandilla*), it became apparent that the focus groups ranged them along a moral scale, in counter-position to the notion of friends. Whereas friendship groups were seen as non-hierarchical, often fairly casually organised, fun-seeking, and mainly law abiding although tolerant of diverse behaviour patterns, *bandas* and *pandillas* were described as having leaders, operating in an organised manner, intolerant of deviations from group norms, and engaged in criminal behaviour:

> A *banda* and a group of friends is not the same thing, because with your group
>
> you get up to mischief, pranks, you play, you jump about, something that doesn't
>
> happen in the *banda* because, for example crudely, you've got to go and steal
>
> because he said so, or she said so, or things like that. (C1:2)

There were, however, some doubts about whether *bandas* always involved criminal activity:

> A good *banda* could be one that does good things, like giving money to charity,
>
> and a *pandilla* focuses on doing bad things. (C3:4)
>
> …the bad *bandas* spend their time smoking, doing drugs, bothering others. In
>
> contrast, the good *bandas* spend their time having fun. (M1:2)

But no such doubts arose concerning the *pandilla*: these were the worst of the worst, groups of *malandros* dedicated to the most serious crimes:

> *Pandillas* are more dangerous [than *bandas*]. They like danger more. (C2:2)
>
> Most of the *pandillas* are bad because they rob, kill… (M1:9)
>
> A *banda* of youths is a bad thing, but not as bad as the *pandilla*, because you're
>
> going to see the *pandilla* on a [street] corner, all made up, aha! with something
>
> like a uniform, all tattooed with a pistol in their belt…and they can even rob you
>
> in the neighbourhood you live in..' (C1:2)

However, what is striking about these descriptions of *pandillas* is that they were all made from a distance: no one in these focus groups said that they belonged to a gang. 'I read an article on the Internet'; '…like in that film they made: *Caracas – Las Dos Caras de La Vida*'; 'my uncle told me about

a gang he belonged to'; 'where I live there are a lot of *pandillas* in a manner of speaking, or *malandros*, so when I go by there I know them all' (C1:2). Ironically, these young respondents' perceptions resonated more with mediated images of gangs than with the characteristics of group delinquency uncovered by Venezuelan researchers.

The findings from these focus groups thus pose a number of questions regarding the validity of the Eurogang indicators. First, the 'group of friends' may be very elastic in Venezuela, including casual short-term acquaintances and comrades with whom the adolescent has maintained a lengthy and more intimate relationship. This potential variety could introduce measurement error in the corresponding survey items. While the initial remedy for that problem might focus on a better specification of the group of friends that the adolescent is asked to think about, it is also worth noting that the Eurogang *definition* of a gang makes no mention of friends – something that also resonates with the testimonial accounts from Venezuelan delinquents, who do not speak so much of friends as of partners in crime. Given that the Eurogang definition refers to a 'youth group', focusing the Eurogang *indicators* on the adolescent's group of friends complicates matters unnecessarily in Venezuela.

Second, as Aldridge *et al.* (2012) observed in relation to European countries, the range of behaviours understood as illegal by Venezuelan adolescents may be much wider than that typically thought of by researchers as characterising gangs. A better measurement strategy would specify key forms of behaviour rather than using the abstract category of illegal behaviour. Third, Eurogang item 7 ('Do you consider your group of friends to be a gang?) is semantically problematic. Venezuelan adolescents recognise both positive and negative variants of groups termed *bandas*, meaning that this word is not necessarily equivalent to the idea of the gang. Paradoxically, they talk about *pandillas* in ways that are congruent with the notion of the gang in metropolitan countries, even though Venezuelan research has not unearthed examples of youth groups that would fit with the international conception of gang. Given that *pandilla* was the word used in the Venezuelan version of Eurogang item 7, would a positive response to this item indicate that adolescents are involved in

gang-like groups that researchers have yet to find? Survey results presented in the next section of this paper suggest that this is not necessarily the case and point to the need to develop alternative measures of delinquent group identity.

Finally, the focus groups reveal a potential problem with the Eurogang's focus on street-oriented youth groups. This problem is the inverse of Aldridge *et al.'s* (2012) observation about the effect of climate in Northern England: in Venezuela the hot climate means that spending a lot of time in public places is a common activity among people of all ages. Thus, this indicator may have less power to discriminate gang-like groups from other groups of adolescents in tropical countries.

The Eurogang Indicators: Construct Validity for Venezuela

The Eurogang indicators were used with Venezuelan samples in ISRD-2 (2006) and ISRD-3 (2013). Both samples comprised seventh (12-13 years old), eighth (13-14 years old) and ninth (14-15 years old) grade students in the capital city of Caracas (population 2.7 million) and the mid-sized city of Mérida (population 250,000). The sample included 1,503 adolescents in 2006 and 2,433 adolescents in 2013. Apart from the Eurogang indicators, both surveys also asked respondents if they had friends who engaged in selected illegal behaviours (drugs, shoplifting, burglary, robbery and assault); and the ISRD-2 survey additionally asked respondents about things they did with friends (drinking/drug use, vandalism, shoplifting, annoying others).

Table 2 shows the prevalence of three measures of gang membership:

- Eurogang (1-6): responses to the first six Eurogang items.

- Eurogang (7): responses to the seventh Eurogang item ('Do you consider your group of friends to be a gang?')

- Eurogang (1-7)[11]

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[11] A potential challenge to the reliability of these indicators is posed by inconsistent responses to the Eurogang items. Thus, the first Eurogang item (Do you have a group of friends?) was designed to serve as a filter question: respondents who answered no to this question were directed to skip the remaining Eurogang items and proceed to the next section of the survey. However, many did not follow the instruction. For example, in ISRD-3, 449 respondents indicated that they did not have a group of friends but 323 of them went on to

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Table 2 shows that there is not much overlap between Eurogang (1-6) and Eurogang (7): only 12.5% of respondents identified by either of these gang definitions in 2006 and 11.9% in 2013 were jointly defined by Eurogang items 1-6 and Eurogang item 7 (Eurogang 1-7). In both samples, Eurogang's item 7 on its own accounted for by far the largest group of 'gang membership': 76.8% of 'any gang' respondents in 2006 and 63.0% in 2013. While the lack of overlap between different definitions is not dissimilar to the findings reported by Matsuda *et al*. (2012), the relative prominence of Eurogang's item 7 contrasts with the results of the U.S. surveys where this latter indicator was less frequent than Eurogang items 1-6.

Table 3 examines construct validity, comparing the correlations between each measure of gang membership and with other measures of group delinquency in one or both of the surveys. Looking at the three measures of gang membership, Eurogang (1-6) and Eurogang (1-7) are highly correlated, as is to be expected since they are similar in all but one indicator. However, Eurogang (7) does not show a high correlation with either Eurogang (1-6) or Eurogang (1-7), even though the latter includes the same item. This is further evidence that there is only a weak semantic association between the word for gang (*pandilla*) and the presence of illegal behaviour. In terms of convergent validity, none of the three measures of gang membership shows high correlations with respondents' reports about friends' illegal behaviour or their own illegal behaviour when with friends – both of which would be expected to capture gang-like behaviour. If correlations should be large (i.e., > 0.5) in order to be considered as the threshold for convergent validity, these measures are clearly well below that value.

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answer the next question (Which of the following best describes the ages in your group of friends?), and similar numbers continued to answer the other Eurogang items. This inconsistency could be explained in various ways: respondent fatigue and associated lack of attention (the ISRD survey was found to be very long by many Venezuelan adolescents); failure to understand the filter instruction (Venezuelan adolescents do not encounter surveys very frequently); the elastic meaning of 'group of friends' in Venezuelan culture, discussed in the previous section. Table 3 reports prevalence based only on affirmative responses to the first Eurogang item.

In terms of discriminant validity, there are only a few variables which are comparable between the two surveys and which could not be speculatively associated with a greater probability of belonging to a gang. Of these, three are included: free time spent in sports activities, the death of either parent, and parents' separation or divorce. There is no prima facie reason why these variables should be significantly associated with belonging to a gang, and Table 3 shows that only four of the 18 correlations are significant (and at the .05 rather than .01 level). Thus, the different Eurogang measures show some discriminant validity. In general, the results in Table 3 could be used to argue that the Eurogang measures are weaker in their convergent validity than their discriminant validity.

A further test of construct validity is to explore the 'risk factors' associated with gang membership. Significant associations with expected variables (and in the expected direction) are taken as evidence of the validity of the measure of gang membership (e.g., Thornberry et al., 2003; Matsuda *et al.* 2012; Boxer et al., 2015). Cronbach and Meehl (1955) designated this strategy as the construction of 'nomological networks', with Cronbach (1988) subsequently distinguishing between 'strong' (theoretically articulated) and 'weak' (empirically sought) networks. Like most nomological networks in the social sciences, exploration of risk factors for gang membership falls into the weak programme for validation because theory is relatively underdeveloped (Katz and Jackson-Jacobs, 2004). With that in mind, we prepared logistic regression models for correlates of gang membership, including variables that have been often identified as risk factors. Table 4 shows the results for the Eurogang 1-6 and Eurogang 7 measures of gang membership.[12] The only consistent correlate of gang membership was the respondent's own delinquent behaviour during the previous twelve months. Having delinquent friends was significantly associated with a higher probability of gang membership (Eurogang 1-6) in both samples, but not with the single item measure (Eurogang 7). Other variables,

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[12] The Eurogang 1-7 measure generated a very small number of cases in the gang membership category, leading to large standard errors for some of the risk variables in the 2013 sample. The results for this measure in the 2006 sample were largely similar to those obtained in the other models but, for brevity, are not included in Table 4.

such as parental relations/supervision and social disorganisation, showed significant associations in some models but not in others. Surprisingly, neither sex nor age were significant correlates in any of the models and samples. Overall, the results point to a relatively low level of construct validity when these measures of gang membership are compared with risk factors identified in the international literature.[13]

Table 4 about here

Alternative Indicators of Gang Membership

An increase in construct validity can only be achieved by attention to content validity. Our previous findings indicate that, if the validity of cross-national measurement of gang membership is to be improved, a number of changes need to be made to the Eurogang indicators. Specifically, references to friends, public places, 'illegal things' and gangs need to be replaced by less ethnocentric measures of youth groups, criminal activity and identity. Table 5 provides an alternative and illustrative proposal for measuring gang membership using six indicators expressed in terms that are more generic. It develops Aldridge *et al.'s* (2012:48-49) proposal to reformulate the current Eurogang measures by focusing on gang identity defined as the reputation for a willingness to use violence. The initial screening question uses this definition to make a basic distinction between gang-like activity and everything else. It is expressed in simple terms, asking respondents if they are 'part of' a 'group of young people who spend time together' that is 'known for being violent.' Its improved validity compared to alternative formulations is premised on the hypothesis that this phrasing will generate higher levels of shared understanding between survey respondents and researchers. The generality of the terms also facilitate translation into other languages. The basic distinction could be refined, if considered appropriate, by including references to 'threatening' and 'criminal' behaviour, although the latter term might encounter some of the problems already raised in relation to 'illegal things.'

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[13] The lower values of R^2 for Model 2 also confirm that the single item asking adolescents if they consider their group of friends to be a *pandilla* (gang) has lower construct validity than the measure based on Eurogang items 1-6.

Table 5 about here

Groups with a reputation for a willingness to use violence could be very varied, including adults and young people, organised crime networks, neighbourhood toughs, some sports fans, and so on. This is certainly the case for Latin America, where such groups could include everything from the *Comandos* in Brazil, 'loose network[s] of local armed groups, each…dominating a small community' (Cano and Ribeiro 2016:364), through the *maras* in Central America, who engage in drugs sales, crime and extortion (Bruneau 2014), to Colombia's *parches*, which construct themselves around a territorially-based and openly deviant identity (Perea 2004). Criminologists usually reserve the term gang for only some of these groups. Following the Eurogang project's interest in youth gangs, Question 1 includes a reference to 'young people,' thereby orienting respondents' thinking towards their interactions with peers. Items 1.A to 1.E represent five probes for those who respond affirmatively to the first question, which are designed to capture more information about groups with a reputation for violence and provide a set of indicators that could help make finer-grained distinctions between youth gangs and other gang-like groups. Item 1.A is a measure of respondents' involvement with the group (how often they spend time with it), which can help inform decisions about who to treat as 'members'. Items 1.B to 1.E measure characteristics of the group itself and can be used to distinguish groups by size, typical age composition and types of illicit activity. Item 1.D further explores identity by asking if the group has a name. Not only are names a relatively strong expression of group identity, but inspection of any names could help to distinguish between gangs and other gang-like groups. Item 1.E probes for different types of illicit activity and the list could be expanded if so desired.

Our proposal aligns with the Eurogang definition of a gang in all but a focus on the street.[14] However, the measurement strategy is markedly different. Whereas the Eurogang items seek to distinguish gangs from other youth groups by moving from broad ('Do you have a group of friends?')

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[14] The proposal does not include a measure of the length of time that the group has existed because for a group to have a reputation implies existence for even a minimal duration. However, a question about the group's time in existence could also be included if the topic is of particular interest to the researcher.

to narrow criteria ('Do you consider your group of friends to be a gang?'), our proposal seeks to identify gang-like groups and then collect additional information about them. In doing this, we would also recommend against pre-defining the operational indicators of the gang and allow empirical research to inform classificatory decisions. Thus, Items 1.A to 1.E in Table 5 can be used to explore the varied characteristics of these groups (for example, with nonlinear principal components analysis), and it is for researchers to decide which, if any, merit the 'gang' label. Given the varied forms of group delinquency within and between countries, this inductive approach can refresh the comparative study of the 'criminologists' gang' through survey research.

Conclusion

As the volume of criminological research (including international surveys) continues to increase so will the study of gangs and gang membership, in part because news and entertainment media are globalising their presence in the collective conscience. The process can be described as one of diffusion, from the United States to Western Europe and then to other cultural contexts such as Latin America.[15] In this paper, we have tapped into the expanding survey research on gang membership at the point where it spread from relatively wealthy research-intensive countries to a different cultural setting (Latin America). If European researchers found it necessary to go beyond US researchers' reliance on a self-nomination question and develop a more comprehensive approach for the valid measurement of gang membership, their own solution (which was not without problems in its originating context) meets with some similar measurement problems when employed in Latin America. The qualitative data in this paper identify challenges to the content validity of some of the Eurogang items and the quantitative data indicate relatively low construct validity for them.

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[15] For example, ISRD-1 included twelve Western European countries and the USA; ISRD-2 included 25 European countries, the USA and Canada and four Caribbean/Latin American countries; ISRD-3 currently includes 20 European countries, two Latin American countries (Brazil, Venezuela), India and Indonesia.

We have proposed an alternative set of items for measuring membership in groups with a reputation for violence, and for describing and classifying those groups in ways that are central to the continued discussion about what the 'criminologists' gang' is. We argue that the terms used should lead to improved content validity (and through that construct validity), a claim that can be tested by further research.

Table 6 about here

Finally, as recent discussions on validity indicate, 'It is the interpretation…that is validated, not the test or the test score' (Kane, 2001:328). Our results do not provide strong support for interpreting prior combinations/selections of the Eurogang items as indicators of gang membership, at least in Venezuela. But this does not mean that other interpretations of the Eurogang indicators should be discounted. For example, Aldridge *et al*. (2012:46) commented that items 5 and 6 (accepting/doing illegal things) measure the normative orientation of the group rather than group identity. We combined responses to these two items to create an ordinal variable ranging from conformist to deviant, as shown in Table 6. Compared to any of the Eurogang definitions of gang membership, the 'Perceived Normative Orientation of the Group' (PNOG)[16] was a stronger correlate of group delinquency and a stronger predictor of individual delinquency.[17] This variable, of particular significance for social learning theory, merits exploration in future research.

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[16] In order to avoid potential contradiction with our previous arguments about the problematic measurement of the 'group of friends' in Venezuela, the perceived normative orientation of the group should be more strictly interpreted as the perceived normative environment among the peers with whom the adolescent interacts.

[17] For example, for the ISRD-2 results, correlation coefficients for the PNOG and group delinquency ranged from 0.215 to 0.416 (mean = 0.329), while coefficients for the Eurogang indicators ranged from 0.077 to 0.314 (mean = 0.198). A logistic regression model for individual delinquency had a goodness-of-fit (Nagelkerke R^2) of 0.208 with the Eurogang 1-6 measure of gang membership in the model and 0.281 with the PNOG. Full results are available from the corresponding author.

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TABLES

Table 1: Eurogang Youth Survey Items and Indicators of Gang Membership	
Item	Response Options **(Eurogang indicators in bold)**
1. Do you have a group of friends that you spend time with?	• No => skip to next section of the survey • **Yes**
2. Which of the following best describes the ages of people in your group?	• under twelve • **twelve to fifteen** • **sixteen to eighteen** • **nineteen to twenty-five** • over twenty-five
3. Does this group spend a lot of time together in public places like the park, the street, shopping areas, or the neighbourhood?	• No • **Yes**
4. How long has this group existed?	• less than three months • **three months to less than one year** • **one to four years** • **five to ten years** • **eleven to twenty years** • **more than twenty years**
5. Is doing illegal things (against the law) accepted by or okay for your group?	• No • **Yes**
6. Do people in your group actually do illegal things (against the law) together?	• No • **Yes**
7. Do you consider your group of friends to be a gang?	• No • **Yes**

Table 2: Prevalence of Three Measures of Gang Membership, Venezuela (2006, 2013)								
Definition	2006				2013			
	No.	% /Total 1	% /Total 2	% /Total 3	No.	% /Total 1	% /Total 2	% /Total 3
A. Eurogang (1-6, only)	18	10.7	1.6	1.2	34	25.2	2.3	1.4
B. Eurogang (7) (Friends are gang, only)	129	76.8	11.3	8.6	85	63.0	5.6	3.5
C. Eurogang (1-7)	21	12.5	1.8	1.4	16	11.9	1.1	0.7
Total 1 - Any gang definition (A, B, or C above)	168	100.0	14.8	11.1	135	100.0	9.3	6.7
Total 2 - Rs with a group of friends	1143	-	100.0	76.0	1511	-	100.0	72.0
Total 3 – Sample size	1503	-	-	100.0	2433	-	-	100.0

Table 3: Convergent and Discriminant Validity for Measures of Group Delinquency, Venezuela (2006, 2013)						
	2006			**2013**		
	Eurogang 1-6	Eurogang 7	Eurogang 1-7	Eurogang 1-6	Eurogang 7	Eurogang 1-7
Eurogang 1-6	-	.226**	.728**	-	.183**	.559**
Eurogang 7	.226**	-	.352**	.183**	-	.383**
Eurogang 1-7	.728**	.352**	-	.559**	.383**	-
Friends - drugs	.236**	.088**	.201**	.207**	.120**	.138**
Friends – shoplifting	.209**	.077*	.154**	.248**	.126**	.198**
Friends - burglary	.147**	.057	.148**	.225**	.160**	.217**
Friends - robbery	.279**	.144**	.285**	.236**	.159**	.247**
Friends - assault	.258**	.116**	.215**	.199**	.139**	.186**
We drink, use drugs	.265**	.161**	.241**	a	a	a
We vandalize things	.314**	.227**	.284**	a	a	a
We shoplift	.263**	.191**	.309**	a	a	a
We annoy people	.133**	.205**	.128**	a	a	a
Sports in spare time	.041	.059	.091*	.073*	.072*	.056
Death of father/mother	.011	.007	-.015	-.017	-.016	-.028
Parents' separation/divorce	.013	-.029	.001	.059*	.026	-.003
Phi or Cramér's V: ** - significant at 0.01 * - significant at 0.05 a – not asked in 2013						

Table 4: Correlates of Gang Membership, Venezuela (2006, 2013)						
	2006			**2013**		
Model 1: Eurogang 1-6	*B*	Wald	OR (95% CI)	*B*	Wald	OR (95% CI)
Sex (Male = 1)	0.11	0.54	1.11 (0.45-2.76)	-0.05	0.01	0.95 (0.38-2.39)
Age (14 or more = 1)	0.06	0.01	1.06 (0.40-2.77)	0.47	1.02	1.60 (0.65-3.96)
Victimized last 12 months (Yes = 1)	0.40	0.01	1.04 (0.45-2.40)	-0.17	0.14	0.84 (0.34-2.08)
Delinquency last 12 months (Yes = 1)	1.39	9.30*	4.03 (1.65-9.86)	1.66	7.44*	5.24 (1.59-17.20)
Delinquent friends (Yes = 1)	1.38	6.93*	3.98 (1.42-11.14)	2.10	9.99*	8.14 (2.22-29.88)
Relation with mother (Poor = 1)	-0.14	0.04	0.87 (0.23-3.30)	0.28	0.16	1.33 (0.33-5.32)
Relation with father (Poor = 1)	0.96	4.69*	2.61 (1.10-6.20)	-0.04	.00	0.97 (0.32-2.92)
Parents know who I'm with (Always)	-	6.77*	-	-	2.08	-
Parents know who I'm with (Sometimes)	0.51	1.28	1.66 (0.69-3.98)	0.12	0.04	1.13 (0.33-3.81)
Parents know who I'm with (Never)	2.00	6.69*	7.41 (1.62-33.76)	0.80	2.05	2.22 (0.74-6.61)
Attachment to school	0.44	0.15	1.05 (0.83-1.31)	-0.22	3.81	0.80 (0.64-1.00)
Social disorganisation	-0.07	1.49	0.93 (0.82-1.05)	0.10	2.83	1.11 (0.98-1.25)
Model fit:	X^2 = 64.32, df= 11, p<.000; Nagelkerke R^2= .285 Hosmer and Lemeshow X^2 = 11.2, df = 8, p<.20			X^2 = 71.0 df= 11, p< .000 ; Nagelkerke R^2= .342 Hosmer and Lemeshow X^2 = 7.5, df = 8, p<.50		
Model 2: Eurogang 7						
Sex (Male = 1)	0.33	1.96	1.40 (0.88-2.23)	0.28	0.96	1.33 (0.75-2.35)
Age (14 or more = 1)	-0.39	2.75	0.68 (0.42-1.07)	-0.47	2.48	0.63 (0.35-1.12)
Victimized last 12 months (Yes = 1)	0.15	0.44	1.12 (0.74-1.83)	-0.03	0.01	0.97 (0.53-1.75)
Delinquency last 12 months (Yes = 1)	1.21	21.57**	3.36 (2.01-5.60)	0.70	4.74*	2.02 (3.47-31.91)
Delinquent friends (Yes = 1)	0.42	2.68	1.52 (0.92-2.52)	0.04	0.02	1.05 (0.54-2.01)
Relation with mother (Poor = 1)	-0.19	0.15	0.82 (0.31-2.21)	0.12	0.05	1.13 (0.39-3.30)
Relation with father (Poor = 1)	-0.21	0.46	0.81 (0.47-1.48)	-0.02	0.00	0.98 (0.44-2.18)
Parents know who I'm with (Always)	-	0.33	-	-	9.93*	-
Parents know who I'm with (Sometimes)	0.02	0.01	1.02 (0.63-1.66)	-0.76	1.90	0.47 (0.16-1.38)
Parents know who I'm with (Never)	0.38	0.32	1.46 (0.39-5.39)	0.99	6.63*	2.68 (1.27-5.69)
Attachment to school	-0.14	3.21	0.87 (0.75-1.01)	-0.21	5.71*	0.81 (0.68-0.96)
Social disorganisation	-0.08	6.13*	0.92 (0.87-0.98)	0.11	7.60*	1.11 (1.03-1.20)
Model fit:	X^2 = 53.5, df= 11, p<.000; Nagelkerke R^2= .121 Hosmer and Lemeshow X^2 = 8.4, df = 8, p<.40			X^2 = 43.4, df = 11 , p<.000; Nagelkerke R^2 = .126 Hosmer and Lemeshow X^2 = 4.1, df = 8, p<.85		
** p <.001						

* p < .05

TABLE 5: Draft Questions for Accessing Gang Activity via Identity

1. Some groups of young people who spend time together are known for being [threatening,] violent [, or criminal]. Are you part of a group like that?

○   0. no => *skip to next section of the survey*

○   1. yes

1.A How often do you hang out with the group?

○   1. Every day

○   2. One or two days a week

○   3. Less than once a week

○   4. Once every few weeks

○   5. Once every few months

1.B How many people usually hang out together?

○   1. 2-5 people

○   2. 6-10 people

○   3. 11-20 people

○   4. More than 20 people

1.C How old are most of the group?

○   1. Under 12

○   2. 12-15

○   3. 16-18

○   4. 19-25

○   5. Over 25

1.D Does the group have a name?

○   0. no

○   1. yes => What is the group's name? _____

1.E Which of the following is the group known for?
(Tick ALL that apply)

○   1. We fight with other people or groups

○   2. We use drugs

○   3. We sell drugs

○   4. We steal things

○   5. We rob people

○   6. We damage property

○   [Can include other options, e.g., defending the neighbourhood; providing protection; spray painting; having tattoos, special clothing.]

○   7. Something else (write in) _____

Table 6: The Perceived Normative Orientation of the Group		
Is doing illegal things (against the law) accepted by or okay for your group?	**Do people in your group actually do illegal things (against the law) together?**	
	No	**Yes**
No	(1) Conformist	(2) Dissonant
Yes	(3) Tolerant	(4) Deviant