A Review of *The Truce: Lessons from an L.A. Gang War*

By

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Book: The Truce: Lessons from an L.A. Gang War
Author: Karen Umemoto
Publisher: Cornell University Press
Year: 2006

Umemoto's ethnographic work traces the evolution of a ten month gang war that eventually polarized the residents of the Oakwood community, in Venice, California, along racial lines. The author who lived nearby during the conflict draws upon her eyewitness experiences, interviews with gang members, law enforcement, community residents and archival materials to extensively document and analyze the effect that this gang war exerted on both community residents and gang members. The author cogently traces an escalation of violence which spilled over from an isolated altercation, between two individuals, into a gang battle between the V-13 Latino gang and the African-American Shoreline Crips and eventually culminated into a perceived full scale race war.

Introducing the theoretical concept of morphing as a technique for studying and understanding group conflict Umemoto insightfully demonstrates how identity markers or social boundaries, such as race, class or group membership, vary in their saliency, centrality and importance over time and on how sets of individuals, or publics, which share common identity markers, interpret or warp a single event differently. Consequently, different publics create divergent interpretive narratives which not only provide meaning to current events but also shape, or frame, how future events and actions are perceived. Thus, multiple publics create multiple realities which may exacerbate or exaggerate group conflict when the actions of one group are erroneously imputed or encoded by another group, or public, in a manner different from the first group's intentions.

The first two chapters of the book outline this innovative and important theoretical framework with an emphasis on discussing the situational saliency of identity, the formation of multiple publics, race and conflict in the 21st Century and how the state can minimize or aggravate group conflict based on its actual or perceived power. The following three chapters delineate the historical events, during 1993 and 1994, which transformed a peaceful racially heterogeneous and harmonious community into a racially polarized war zone. The author provides an excellent chronological discussion and interpretation guiding the reader from the initial murder of an Hispanic

male by his African-American female friend through the ensuing interracial gang conflict which eventually morphed into a racial conflict dividing the Latino and African-American community members. The ensuing conflict and racial division burgeoned to the point at which each public began to engage in false accusations as well as erroneously placing blame and creating an atmosphere of fear, mistrust and overt racial hostility. Umemoto explicates the changing importance of identity markers from family to gang and finally to race over the course of this conflict documenting how the Latino and African-American community members encoded and assigned divergent meanings to each incident of the gang violence, and the subsequent police response, differentially based upon varying interpretations of preceding events.

The final three chapters provide an explanation of the de-escalation of the violence, and racial animosity, which lead to an eventual gang truce and offer invaluable lessons on the role of transpublics (i.e., individuals or groups who can understand and communicate effectively across numerous social boundaries) for mediating conflict. Throughout the ten month conflict two groups, with extremely divergent interpretations of the events, as well as differing roles and goals, worked simultaneously to restore order and bring an end to the violence with one group being far more successful in its approach.

The author not only provides an excellent analysis of the impact of the violence on the community but also produces an excellent study of the interaction of the firefighters, or law enforcement and prosecutors, and the mediators, or community activists, with the community members and gang leaders and on how their approaches aggravated and mitigated social conflict respectively. The firefighters subscribed to highly punitive and suppression oriented tactics including major raids, street sweeps, and intensive surveillance of gang members which unintentionally backfired creating heightened or intensified gang cohesion and a perception that the Shoreline Crips, and by extension, all members of the African-American neighborhood were being unfairly targeted based on their racial identity. Indeed, during the most intense period of racial divide some African-American residents viewed the Crips as protecting them from not only the V-13 Latino gang members but from the police as well.

The mediators were successful in deracializing the conflict and transformed or morphed the salient identity marker, from race, back to community and gang affiliation. Both Latino and African-American residents were fighting gentrification and the possible loss of their homes to real estate speculators, prior to the gang war, and one set of mediators drew the two together in a "Save the Community" initiative thus making class a more salient identity boundary than race. Another set of mediators focused on the gang members themselves in a "Save Yourselves" initiative thus the two gangs morphed into one public along the identity of being a gang member itself versus two distinct publics derived on racial and ethnic identity markers. Once the youth saw the harm that the violence was inflicting on each other, as well as on family and friends, a truce was imminent.

The major strength that can be derived from Umemoto's ethnographic case study is that her morphology of conflict theory and its emphasis on multiple publics has vast and important implications for public policy and possesses a high degree of generalizability which offers promise for understanding and resolving all forms of conflict from individual to family to community and even to intractable conflicts between nation-states. If divergent publics interpret events differently then an understanding of each group's reality is imperative in order to identify and perceive all facets of a problem and attain a mutually agreed upon resolution. Consequently, problem solving techniques or working focus group sessions that involve collaboration, cooperation and consensus, among multiple agencies, should begin with an exploration of each public's perceptions, interpretative lenses and attempt to understand the historical context of the conflict as well. In essence, each member would receive training, or insight, on how to view the conflict as a transpublic.

The theoretical framework can also be utilized to examine the evolution of conflict and chart its course based on the saliency of the disputants' identity markers or social boundaries. Tracking conflict in this manner would facilitate the identification of, what Umemoto refers to as, windows of opportunity and enable mediators to identify identity marker specific interventions and at what point temporally they would have a greater probability of successful implementation.

The book should appeal to a wide audience including community organizers, social workers and especially law enforcement personnel who work with gangs in their respective jurisdictions. Indeed, one of the greatest lessons learned is that suppression oriented approaches, which rely heavily on law enforcement, can boomerang if they do not include any complementary prevention and intervention components and can only produce a greater chasm between the affected gangs. The volume will make an excellent addition to senior and graduate level seminars in criminal justice, urban studies and police-community relations' courses as it will certainly stimulate considerable interest in, and debate of, how to manage social conflict.