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Street Gangs: The Inter- and Intra-Group Processes

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Gang involvement, gang membership, and gang activity are attractive, media popular topics. Media attention has generated an asymmetry in news outlets (Spergel, 1995; Sullivan, 2006) creating glamorous media images of gang membership (Przemieniecki, 2005). So, it is not surprising when youth admire gang members, mimic them, and aspire to join gangs (Hughes & Short, 2005). If they do join a gang they are likely to become more violent than they were previously even if they already associated with prolifically offending peers (Klein, Weerman & Thornberry, 2006). Consequently, researchers have strived to explain street gangs in a plethora of research spanning pretty much the last century.

Existing literature provides much about the circumstances in which gangs form and flourish (see Wood & Alleyne, 2010, for review). For example, gangs probably form to fulfill adolescent needs such as: peer friendship, pride, identity development, enhancement of self-esteem, excitement, acquisition of resources, as well as goals that may not — due to low socio-economic environments — be available legitimately (Goldstein, 2002). Gangs offer a strong psychological sense of community, a physical and psychological neighborhood, a social network, and social support (Goldstein, 1991). In essence, gangs form for the same reasons that any groups form (Goldstein, 2002). In this chapter we consider research and theories regarding gang formation, structure, and behavior. In particular, we consider the group processes that underpin and explain these important facets of gang culture, and suggest theoretical pathways to fill these gaps.

### **Defining a Gang**

The recognition that “No two gangs are just alike” (Thrasher, 1927, p. 36) instigated a heated and ongoing debate about gang definitions (see Esbensen, Winfree, He, & Taylor, 2001, for review). Definitions are vital since without them we cannot know what researchers refer to. Research founded on assumed understandings only create ambiguity and create distorted media and public officials’ views of gangs (Horowitz 1990). A gang is a group but

a group is not necessarily a gang and the lack of consensus about this difference has dogged gang research for decades (see Spergel, 1995, for review).

A main impasse in agreeing a definition is whether criminal activity should be a defining feature of a gang (e.g., Bennett & Holloway, 2004). Certainly, if criminal activity is excluded then there will be “good” and “bad” gangs (i.e., those criminally active and those not). But this will only exacerbate the chaos that infects the definition debate. For example, Everard (2006) notes that in Glasgow, groups of teenagers labeled as “gangs” claimed that they banded together to stay out of trouble. So, how can researchers consider such a group in the same vein as they do those involved in drive-by shootings? Equally, such definitions run the risk that non-offending youth will be stigmatized by the label “gang” and gain a “gangster” identity (Bullock & Tilley, 2008). A defining feature of any entity is surely who wants to examine it. Those interested in gangs include the police, criminologists, task force agents, and, more recently, forensic psychologists. And the main reason why they are interested in gangs is their criminal activity. Gangs may differ on many dimensions, (e.g., size, member age etc.) but one aspect they all share is their criminality. Thus, we argue that criminal activity represents the core definitional feature of a gang.

The Eurogang network has reached a consensus on definition (Weerman, Maxson, Esbensen, Aldridge, Medina, & van Gemert, 2009) and makes an important distinction between gang “descriptors” and gang “definers.” Descriptors are descriptive (e.g., ethnicity, age, gender, special clothing and argot, location, group names, crime patterns, and so on; Klein, 2006) and should not influence definition. Definers, however, are central to characterizing a gang. The Eurogang definition offers four defining elements: **durability** (at least several months), **street orientation** (away from home, work, school), **youthfulness** (adolescence or early twenties), and **identity via illegal activity** (criminal activity). Thus, the definition states that: “a street gang (or troublesome youth group corresponding to a street

gang elsewhere) is any durable, street-oriented youth group whose identity includes involvement in illegal activity.” (Weerman et. al., 2009, p.20). This consensus is vital for the future of gang research. A definition is more than a description of what we mean. It is a research tool—an “instrument”—that “...underlies all other instruments...” (Weerman et. al, 2009, p.6). Without the vital parameters set by a definition even the best researchers’ efforts and best research designs will be seriously hindered by common misunderstanding.

### **Gang Membership and Structure**

Research examining member characteristics, has focused primarily on the age (e.g., Rizzo, 2003), gender (see below), and ethnic origins (e.g., Gatti, Tremblay, Vitaro, & McDuff, 2005) of gang members. Gang members in the United States and the United Kingdom are overwhelmingly young on entry to the gang (12–18 year old; e.g., Rizzo, 2003). Some continue gang membership well into their 20s or even older (e.g., Bullock and Tilley, 2002). Research examining ethnic composition has found that some gangs are homogeneous (e.g., Bullock & Tilley, 2002), whilst others are heterogeneous (e.g., Gatti et al., 2005). This inconsistency supports the notion that gangs simply reflect the ethnic make-up of their neighborhoods (Bullock & Tilley, 2002).

The media portray gangs as highly organized with a clear structure, leadership, and committed membership. In fact, “Street gangs generally are alike, and yet there is much difference among them.” (Klein & Maxson, 2006, p. 194). For instance, gangs may have a haphazard organizational structure or they may have a written constitution (Decker, 2001). Most have rules and group meetings and some even take a political interest by actively supporting specific candidates (Decker, 2001). Some gangs own legitimate businesses, which may also launder money from drug sales, whilst others have no legitimate business interests (Decker, 2001). Many gangs have subgroups; smaller factions based on friendship, school attendance, common residence or similarities in age, gender, or ethnicity (Klein &

Maxson, 2006). Membership is often transient leaving many gangs with an unstable structure (e.g., Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith & Tobin., 2003).

To lend coherence to gang structures, Klein and Maxson (2006) derived a taxonomy of five gang types: Traditional gangs; Neotraditional gangs; Compressed gangs; Collective gangs and Speciality gangs. **Traditionals** have existed for more than 20 years and generally exceed 100 members with a wide age range (e.g., 9 – 30+ years). Probably due to size they usually have subgroups, formed by age groups or area. They are territorial, identify strongly with their area and their criminal activity is generally versatile. **Neotraditionals** are similar to Traditionals but have existed for less than 10 years. They are medium or large in size (generally 50 – 100 members, but may have hundreds) and often have subgroups, again according to age or area. Members may be very young or much older. Like Traditionals, Neotraditionals are territorial and versatile in criminality. **Compressed** gangs are smaller with up to 50 members, no subgroups and have existed for less than 10 years. Age ranges are narrow (generally only 10 years between youngest and oldest), they may or may not be territorial but again they are versatile in crime. **Collectives** are similar to Compressed gangs but are bigger with a wider age-range. They have existed for 10-15 years and membership usually exceeds 100, but can be less. They do not normally have subgroups, they may or may not be territorial and, again, their criminality is versatile. Due to chaotic membership they have fewer distinguishing characteristics than other gangs. **Speciality** gangs differ from all other gangs because they concentrate on specific offenses which are the group's main focus. They are small (50 or less), seldom have subgroups, have existed for less than 10 years, and have a clearly defined territory. Their ages are generally similar (less than 10 range) but can be wider.

### **Leadership, Status, and Female Membership**

The image of a gang being having a charismatic leader is not supported by research. The group norms of gangs mean that they generally function as a group and are unlikely to have stable leadership (Klein & Maxson, 2006). Indeed, many gang members are hostile to the idea of a leader (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996). When it does occur, leadership is quite informal, and functions on the person's potential to satisfy the gang's needs (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996).

Thrasher, (1927) noted differential levels of gang membership; an inner circle, rank and file, and fringe members. This remains; gangs have a fluid hierarchy of members and youth on the periphery (e.g., Alleyne & Wood, 2010; Curry, Decker & Eagley, 2002; Esbensen et al., 2001). Unsurprisingly, intra-gang norms dictate that core members have higher status; generally earned by violent acts against rival gangs (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996). Core members often have lower levels of: school performance, judged intelligence, impulse control, desire for rehabilitation, and interests outside the gang (Klein, 1971). They are also more likely to be: psychopathic, dependent on their group, willing to fight, and get others into trouble or skip school. Core members show more commitment to their group through—for example—participation in spontaneous activities, clique involvement, and group contribution (Klein, 1971). Predictably then, given their commitment to the gang, core members are most resistant to rehabilitation (Klein & Maxson, 2006). And since cohesiveness is often commensurate with criminality (i.e., the one increases levels of the other; Klein & Maxson, 2006), it seems that the gang members who are least likely to change will also be those who are most criminally active.

Researchers concentrate mainly on male gang members, and neglect and/or trivialize female membership (Moore & Hegedorn, 2001; Moloney, Hunt, Joe-Laidler & MacKenzie, 2011). Levels of female membership differ between gangs and across time. For instance, in the U.S.A. in 1970 10% of gang members were thought to be female (Miller, 1975), by 2001

it was 37% (Peterson, 2001), which is reflected in current findings of 36% for both the U.S.A. (Gover, Jennings, & Tewkesbury, 2009) and the U.K. (Alleyne & Wood, 2010). Collapsing across findings probably puts the overall female gang membership at about 25% (Klein & Maxson, 2006). Unsurprisingly, recent increases in female members have generated public concern and media attention (Moloney et al., 2011). So, quite why researchers have neglected roughly a quarter of gang members is unclear. Some argue that female members are viewed as pale imitations of their male counterparts (e.g., Spergel, 1995) with little gang-role other than as sexual objects serving male members (e.g., Sanchez-Jankowski, 1991).

However, others report two distinct categories of female membership: ‘she’ gangs - solely female groups who concentrate on violence and crime (Pitts, 2008); or females in mixed groups who are active and assertive; standing equal to the males (Young, Fitzgerald, Hallsworth & Joseph, 2007). Females also earn respect and status just as males do - by achieving the gang’s aims (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996), and may be considerably violent (Curry, Ball & Fox, 1994). Alternatively, females may take ancillary roles by hiding guns or drugs for male members (Pitts, 2008) or acting as ‘bait’ to attract rival gang members into vulnerable situations (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996). Although females generally commit fewer crimes than male members, they do so at a higher rate than non-gang males or females (e.g., Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993). They may commit property and status crimes (i.e., age-related, such as underage drinking), but are most likely to commit drug-related offenses (Moore & Hegedorn, 2001).

Although female gang membership is neglected by research, it is an important area of study – now more than ever. Changes in family structure, particularly in poorer communities in the last decades (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996) mean that women are often lone parents. And so the increase in female gang membership over the past decades may have far reaching



effects on the intergenerational transmission of gang membership, and must not be ignored by future research.

### **Motivation for Membership and Gang Activity**

Underprivileged youth may be enticed into gangs because of the opportunity to gain respect and status (Anderson, 1999; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Alleyne & Wood, 2010). Knox (1994) maintains that gangs exert two types of tempting social influence: coercive power – the threat or use of force and violence; and the power to pay, buy, or impress. As mentioned, young boys admire gang members, mimic them, and aspire to membership (Hughes & Short, 2005). This admiration may be reinforced by films depicting rewards for gang-like behaviors (Przemieniecki, 2005). So, youth may be attracted to gangs because they see a chance to acquire resources and satisfy goals that cannot be obtained legitimately within low-income environments (Goldstein, 2002). On achieving power and resources via membership youth may also acquire higher peer status. Research shows that gang members (Anderson, 1999; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Alleyne & Wood, 2010) and peripheral youth (not full members), value status highly (Alleyne & Wood, 2010). This suggests that on-the-cusp youth aspire to the status that fully-fledged gang members possess. Attraction may also be mutual since gangs often select/recruit members who are already delinquent (Thornberry et al., 2003; Gordon et al., 2004; Alleyne & Wood, 2010). Thus, the gang's interest in delinquent youth may positively reinforce behavior condemned by others (e.g., parents, schools etc.), and this may raise the youth's self esteem (see Dukes, Martinez, & Stein, 1997).

Once a member, a youth's criminal behavior is set to increase. One of the most robust findings in criminological research is that gangs are disproportionately delinquent and violent (Thornberry, 1998). Gang members commit more crime (especially violent crime) than even prolifically-offending non-gang delinquents (Tita & Ridgeway, 2007) and are more involved in drug dealing and use (Klein & Maxson, 2006). In the U.S., gang members are more likely

than non-gang youth to carry a gun to school, possess illegal weapons, and use a gun to commit crime (Miller & Decker, 2001; Decker & Curry, 2002). The link between gangs and violence is so profound that fluctuations in murder and violent crime levels in U.S. cities such as: Chicago, (Curry, 2000), Cleveland and Denver (Huff, 1998), Los Angeles (Howell & Decker, 1999), Miami (Inciardi & Pottieger, 1991), Milwaukee (Hagedorn, 1994), and St Louis (Miller & Decker, 2001) have been attributed to variations in gang activity. In Europe, gang, compared to non-gang violence, occurs in public, involves more weapons, more assailants, and more victims (often accidentally) not known to their assailants (Klein, et al., 2006; see also Vasquez et al., this volume). In the U.K. at least half of the 55 murders of youth aged 13-19 in 2007-08 in London were thought to be gang-related (Home Affairs Committee, 2009) leading the Government to issue anti-gang guidance to schools (BBC, 2010).

Most gangs are territorial (e.g., Klein & Maxson, 2006), using graffiti and threats to stamp ownership on their territory (Spergel, 1995; Alleyne, 2010), and, as mentioned above, gang members value status (Alleyne & Wood, 2010). Together, these findings suggest that acquiring and maintaining territory and status (gang and individual members) may motivate criminality. Perceived threats from others to status and territory are typically counteracted by a group response (Abelson, Dasgupta, Park & Banaji, 1998). Threats may stem from rival gangs and authority figures such as the police. So, it is not surprising that gang members hold anti-authority attitudes (Kakar, 2005; Lurigio, Flexon, & Greenleaf, 2008; Alleyne & Wood, 2010). It is possible that conflict between gangs and authority figures stem from vicarious personalism (Cooper & Fazio, 1979) where authority actions are perceived as directed specifically at their gang. Members then react with violence, which then cements gang relations, and increases cohesion and commitment. Even interventions attempting to

reduce group cohesion may be construed as oppositional threat and paradoxically reinforce the gang's status and cohesion (Klein & Maxson, 2006).

### **Gang Membership: Theoretical Explanations**

Research offers a plethora of reasons why youth join gangs. Existing theories stem mostly from criminological perspectives (see Wood & Alleyne, 2010 for a review).

However, no one theory fully explains gang membership. For instance Thrasher (1927) argued that **social disorganization** leads to the breakdown of conventional social institutions such as the school, the church, and most importantly, the family. Thrasher, (1927) neatly set the failure of conventional institutions in opposition to the thrill and excitement that gangs offer “the thrill and zest of participation in common interests, more especially corporate action, in hunting, capture, conflict, flight and escape” (p. 32-33).

Shaw and McKay (1931) developed Thrasher's (1927) concepts by proposing that socially disorganized neighborhoods **culturally transmit** criminal traditions. For Shaw and McKay (1931), families in poor inner-city areas have low levels of functional authority over children, who, once exposed to delinquent traditions, succumb to delinquency. In this cultural climate, gang membership provides satisfying alternatives to unsatisfactory legitimate conventions.

Sutherland (1937) recognizing the prevalence of criminal behavior across social classes developed a theory of **differential association**. Sutherland asserts that youth develop attitudes and skills to become delinquent by learning from individual “carriers” of criminal norms and argued that a principal part of this criminal learning comes from small social groups such as gangs. **Strain theory** (Merton, 1938) argues that society sets universal goals and then offers opportunities to achieve them to a limited number of people. The resulting inequality creates a strain on cultural goals. This, Merton proposes, leads to anomie (Durkheim 1893); a breakdown in the cultural structure due to divisions between prescribed

norms and people's ability to adhere to them (Merton 1938). Cohen (1955) saw gang members as working class youth who experience strain and status frustration. Status frustration may be ameliorated as youth associate with similar others to "strike out" against middle class ideals and form delinquent subcultures where instant gratification, fighting, and destructive behavior become the new values.

Although **differential opportunity** (Cloward & Ohlin, 1961), is often considered a general theory of delinquency, it began life as a theory of gangs (Knox, 1994). Cloward and Ohlin (1961), like Merton (1938), explain class differences in opportunity, but unlike Merton, they argue that opportunity for delinquency is also limited. They argue that Sutherland also failed to consider that access to "criminal schools" varies across the social structure. Consequently, they unite two sociological traditions; access to legitimate means (Merton 1938; Cohen 1955) and access to illegitimate means (Sutherland 1937).

**Control theory** (Gottfredson & Hirschi 1990; Hirschi 1969) neatly diverts attention from why offenders offend, to why conformists do not offend. Whilst strain theory concentrates on the presence of negative cultural relationships in delinquency, control theory focuses on the absence of key relationships (Agnew, 1992; Klemp-North, 2007). The central contention is that people are inherently disposed to offend due to short term gains (e.g., immediate money) and crime satisfies desires in the quickest and simplest ways possible (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). A breakdown in social bonds or inadequate psychological support during childhood leaves a child free to act on his/her natural inclinations without adverse emotional consequences. Adequate child rearing necessitates: monitoring the child's behavior and recognizing and punishing deviant behavior, creating, ... "a child more capable of delaying gratification, more sensitive to the interests and desires of others, more independent, more willing to accept restraints on his activity and more unlikely to use force or violence to attain his ends." (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990, p. 97).

### **Empirical Evidence**

A wealth of research supports the theories outlined above. For example, youth are thought to join gangs because membership compensates for environmental shortfalls (e.g., low employment opportunities) by providing illegitimate means to goals (Klemp-North, 2007). Research also shows that youth living in highly delinquent neighborhoods are more likely to become delinquent than youth in low delinquency areas (e.g., Hill, Lui, & Hawkins, 2001). Gang members are also more exposed to negative environmental influences, such as drug taking and delinquent peer groups (e.g., Klemp-North, 2007) and neighborhoods with existing gangs (Spergel, 1995).

In terms of familial influences, research shows that gang members' families are often disorganized and gang members have often lost contact with a parent(s) due to death, separation, or divorce (Klemp-North, 2007). If families are intact, gang members often experience poor parental management (Thornberry, et al., 2003; Sharp, Aldridge, & Medina, 2006) or levels of physical punishment that cause them to leave home or retaliate with similar aggression (Klein, 1995). Further, gang members' families are often criminally active (e.g., Eitle Gunkel, & van Gundy, 2004) and youth are likely to become criminal if exposed to law-breaking attitudes early in life, over a prolonged period of time, and from people they like (e.g., Sutherland & Cressey, 1960). Furthermore, familial gang members (i.e., parents, siblings, etc.) increase the risk of joining a gang (Spergel, 1995) since familial criminality (Eitle, et al., 2004; Sharp et al., 2006), and gang-involved families (Spergel, 1995) provide environments that reinforce gang-related and delinquent behavior (Thornberry et al., 2003).

Research also shows that poor performance in and commitment to school facilitates gang membership (e.g., Thornberry et al., 2003). Gang members often have a low IQ (Spergel, 1995) and/or learning disabilities (Hill et. al, 1999), which may adversely affect the youth's ability to flourish at school. In turn, this can generate low commitment to school life

and a positive future (e.g., Brownfield, 2003) by endorsing perceptions that legitimate opportunities are unavailable.

If youth cannot integrate into legitimate societal institutions (e.g., school/work), they may be tempted into deviant peer groups (Hill et al., 1999). Delinquent peers and the pressure they exert substantially increase chances that youth will become involved in delinquency (e.g., the confluence model – Dishion, Patterson, & Griesler, 1994; Monahan, Steinberg, & Cauffman, 2009) and gang membership (e.g., Esbensen & Weerman, 2005).

### **Individual Differences: Psychological Perspectives of Gang Membership**

Although an abundance of excellent research supports the above theories, critics point out their tendency to see people as vessels to be filled with society's impositions (Emler & Reicher, 1995). There is also evidence that refutes several theoretical propositions. For instance, children raised in the same household are "variably prone" to gang involvement and gang members just as easily emerge from wealthier backgrounds (Spergel, 1995). Another problem is that we understand little about why most lower class youth eventually lead law-abiding lives despite their economic status remaining static (Goldstein 1991). We also do not know why it is that 33% of youth from deprived areas, who have experienced significant trauma (e.g., acrimonious divorce, domestic violence, family estrangement from siblings), have never offended (Webster, et. al, 2006).

Moreover, far from rebelling against middle class norms, many gang members endorse middle class values (e.g., Sikes 1997) and spend a lot of time engaged in conventional pursuits such as trying to find a job, sporting activities, and committing to a positive future by, for example, enlisting in the Navy (Hughes & Short, 2005). Research also shows that parental supervision has a very modest relationship with gang membership (LeBlanc & Lanctot, 1998). Moreover, evidence shows that it is legitimate social controls that urge gang members to stop offending. Gang members leave the gang in favor of

fatherhood (Moloney, Mackenzie, Hunt, & Joe-Laidler, 2009), motherhood (Moloney et al., 2011), and employment (Sampson & Laub, 2001). In addition, the classic study conducted by Short and Strodtbeck (1965) found no support for the theories outlined above and challenged assumptions that gangs oppose white, middle class American culture since many ethnic minorities adhere to their own cultures and ignore the majority culture that they apparently contest.

Each of these findings highlights the importance of individual differences and the psychological processes that underpin differential behavior of gang members and youth generally. So far, research has paid little attention to individual differences and the psychology of gang membership (Thornberry et. al, 2003). Some work has examined personality traits and identified that youth with psychopathic tendencies (i.e., high hyperactivity, low anxiety and anti-social tendencies) living in disorganized neighborhoods (i.e., with a high turnover of residents) are five times more likely to become gang members than youth without such personality traits (Dupéré, Lacourse, Willms, Vitaro, & Tremblay, 2006). They are also less sensitive to parental attempts at supervision (Dupéré et. al, 2006) and even more vulnerable to gang membership if they live in an adverse family environment (Lacourse, Nagin, Vitaro, Côté, Arseneault & Tremblay, 2006). As noted earlier, we already know that certain psychological factors are important in gang membership (e.g., attitudes, IQ levels, learning difficulties, mental health problems, and low self esteem). Psychology, clearly, has much to offer gang research, but so far it has been rather quiet on the topic (see Wood & Alleyne, 2010 for a review). Below we outline relevant psychological theories that may illuminate the study of gangs.

### **Social Learning Theory**

Psychological theories such as Bandura's (1977) social learning theory can offer insight into gang membership. Bandura maintained that behavior may be learned via direct

and vicarious learning and that their emergence may also be influenced by physical factors such as genes and hormones. So, aggression could be learned via direct observations (e.g., familial abuse, neighborhood delinquency) or vicarious experiences (e.g., television). The behavior can be triggered by factors such as: aversion (thereby causing anger), modeling (e.g., another being rewarded for aggression), incentives (i.e., gaining financial rewards), and/or instructions (i.e., being told to aggress by superior others - e.g., gang leaders). A behavior is repeated if it is reinforced (e.g., rewards such as money, peer approval, and elevated status) and if moral issues can be resolved by justifying the action (e.g., rival gang members deserve to be attacked).

Research lends support to social learning theory concepts by showing that factors such as peer criminality and delinquency (Winfrey, Backstrom, & Mays, 1994; Lahey, Gordon, Loeber, Stouthamer-Loeber, & Farrington, 1999; Esbensen et al., 2001; Thornberry et al., 2003; Klein & Maxson, 2006), parental criminality (Winfrey et al., 1994; Eitle et al., 2004; Klein & Maxson, 2006), peer attitudes, peer pressure and the individual's negative moral attitudes (Winfrey et al., 1994; Esbensen et al., 2001; Sharp et al., 2006), are more capable of distinguishing gang members from non-gang youth than demographic characteristics (i.e., gender, ethnicity, place of residence, etc.). However, social learning theory fails to specify how much individuals need to favor crime before they adopt criminal lifestyles (such as gang membership) since people generally hold beliefs that justify crime only in certain situations (Agnew, 1995; Akers, 1997).

### **Social Identity Theory**

Another psychological theory that can shed light on gang membership is social identity theory (Tajfel, 1974 – see Viki and Abrams, this volume for a more in-depth discussion). Research suggests that an individual's self-concept is partly composed of their social and psychological group(s) membership (Tajfel, 1974; Turner, 1982). And so this



theory outlines the functional significance of group membership to individual identity, which may then be expressed with respect to group membership, (Turner, 1982; Sherman, Hamilton, & Lewis, 1999). Within the group, determinants of social identity include processes such as, in-group-out-group distinctions (e.g., favoritism vs. discrimination) and shared attitudes, values, and beliefs of members (Goldstein, 2002). The group itself has a collective identity, which the group defends against perceived threats (Emler & Reicher, 1995). And social psychologists show how intergroup competitive and discriminatory behavior can be provoked by the mere awareness of an out-group (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This idea was neatly demonstrated by the classic 'Robbers Cave experiment' (Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood & Sherif, 1961), where even arbitrarily created groups – whose members did not know each other – resulted in in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination. Sherif suggested that the perceived threat of an out-group to goal attainment provoked group solidarity during intergroup competition (Dion, 1979).

Social identity theory has much to offer gang research – especially in terms of their group processes, (Klein & Maxson, 2006). However, in the study of gangs we also need to understand psychological processes at the individual level. For instance, we need to understand where the inclination to join deviant and violent groups originates and why it might differ between say two youth from the same family (Spergel, 1995). Certainly group membership may foster and develop aspects of a youth's character, but to understand gangs fully we also need to understand more about the psychological processes that underlie an individual's inclination for deviance.

### **Interactional Theory**

Addressing the gang issue more specifically, interactional theory (Thornberry, 1987; Thornberry & Krohn, 2001; Thornberry et al., 2003) builds on earlier criminological theories by proposing that gang membership involves a reciprocal relationship between the individual

and: peer groups, social structures (i.e., poor neighborhood, school and family environments), weakened social bonds, and a learning environment that fosters and reinforces delinquency. This theory therefore links concepts from control theory and social learning theory. As discussed previously, control theory argues that people become deviant when their bonds to society weaken and social learning theory maintains that crime is learned and positively reinforced. Interactional theory therefore offers a developmental explanation of delinquency where control, learning and delinquency factors are reciprocal and influence the individual across his/her lifespan (Thornberry et al., 2003).

As noted earlier, Thornberry and colleagues (2003) maintain that gang membership can result from selection where gangs select and recruit existing delinquents (Lahey et al., 1999; Craig, Vitaro, Gagnon & Tremblay, 2002). It also argues that membership occurs through facilitation where gangs offer opportunities for delinquency to non-delinquent youth (Gatti et al., 2005; Gordon et al., 2004; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte & Chard-Wierschem, 1993), and enhancement where gang members are recruited from a population of youth who are more antisocial than non-gang youth before membership, but become even more so following membership (Gatti et al., 2005; Thornberry et al., 1993).

Interactional theory examines gang membership from a unique perspective. It considers that not all members are delinquent before joining a gang and how gang membership facilitates/escalates delinquency. However, this theory also has its limitations. So far it does not provide insight into the specific psychological processes that motivate gang membership and neither does it explain why youth leave a gang. Research shows that risk factors from social and environmental domains, (i.e., the individual, family, school, peer, and neighborhood factors), as discussed earlier, increase the likelihood of joining a gang. And the more risk factors a youth experiences, the more prone s/he will be to gang membership (Hill et al., 2001; Howell & Egley, 2005). Since most gang research is conducted with

adolescent samples, Howell and Egley argue that the pathway to gang membership is well underway in childhood and so early key factors that precede acknowledged risk factors are unknown. Howell and Egley (2005) therefore propose that interactional theory be expanded to include risk factors in younger age groups. Nonetheless, interactional theory offers a fruitful way forward for developing gang theory and gang research.

### **Current Research and Theoretical Developments**

No one theory fully explains gang development. A good theory should be able to explain and predict behavior (e.g., Newton-Smith, 2002). It should be coherent, consistent, and unify aspects of a diverse phenomenon to provide a clear and logical account of the world. Theory knitting refers to integrating the best existing ideas into a new framework (Ward & Hudson, 1998). It involves identifying both common and unique ideas from existing theories to preserve good ideas (Ward & Beech, 2004). An integrated theory of gang membership should therefore bring together the good ideas contained in current theories into a model with explanatory power and testable hypotheses. Such a model will facilitate the examination of specific aspects of gang membership and the further development of theory.

### **A Unified Theory of Gang Involvement**

A Unified Theory of Gang Involvement (Wood & Alleyne, 2010; see Figure 1) is the latest comprehensive model that brings together both criminological and psychological factors to membership. It draws together concepts from criminological theory and integrates them with relevant psychological factors (see Figure 1) and includes concepts from similar models (e.g., Howell & Egley, 2005) to provide a comprehensive framework to guide empirical work. It illustrates the pathway into criminality and/or gang membership but it also illustrates non-criminal pathways, and pathways out of criminality and/or gang membership. Hence the model offers a rounded conceptualization of criminality, gang membership, and

non criminal involvement. And it is this inclusion of alternative pathways together with key psychological and criminological factors which distinguishes it from other similar models

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

### **Individual, Social, and Environmental Influences**

As the model shows, social factors, individual characteristics and environment are important starting points for social development. Family structure and type of neighborhood inter-relate since families with poor or unstable structures (i.e. frequent house moves and/or changes in parental partners) potentially live in disorganized neighborhoods. However, the model also considers organized neighborhoods as starting points for gang membership, since individual factors (e.g., psychopathic personality traits, low IQ levels, learning difficulties, mental health problems, and low self esteem) may facilitate gang membership even if the neighborhood and family are stable. Environmental factors influence social factors such as formal and informal control. Disorganized neighborhoods may be difficult to police (formal control) and informal social controls (e.g., parental supervision) may be difficult due to family structure. This may weaken family bonds. Since poorly supervised youth are less likely to succeed at school, a breakdown in informal controls means the youth's school performance is likely to suffer. Organized neighborhoods may have more formal social control and more stable families, but individual factors such as psychopathic traits etc. (outlined above) will present social problems for families, challenge informal social controls, and place a strain on family bonds. These individual factors may also adversely affect a youth's school performance and the school's ability to manage the youth. In turn, school failure, weakened family bonds, and social controls, may impact on a youth's levels of anxiety, mental health problems, and self esteem.

### **Social Cognitive Factors**

Personal and social factors will shape the youth's social perception of his/her world. Gang activity in the neighborhood will inform a youth's attitudes and beliefs about gang membership and crime. If gangs are not active in the neighborhood, youth may develop perceptions of gang membership and crime from media images (see above) or from vicarious experiences of school friends who live in gang-active neighborhoods. Accompanying perceptions of gangs will be perceptions of legitimate opportunities. Difficulties or failure at school may impact on self esteem and create negative perceptions of legitimate opportunities - leading to strain. Neighborhoods peppered with gangs and crime may create fear of victimization, which coupled with perceptions of limited opportunities, may create perceptions of the world as a hostile place. Negative attitudes to authority may form if youth attribute school failure to officials rather than the self. And if crime is high in the neighborhood, and formal social control is low, youth may develop hostile or even contemptuous perceptions of the police as failing (or not bothering) to protect people in poor neighborhoods. Perceptions of social environment, shared values such as a mutual like/dislike of school, mutual attitudes to authority, and mutual fear of victimization will feed into the youth's selection of peers.

### **Peer Selection**

Selection of peers will be based on commonalities and these will strengthen existing attitudes and social cognitions. Youth who flourish at school and who have a solid relationship with parents are likely to associate with peers who share these attributes (regardless of neighborhood structure and crime rates). These associations will strengthen pro-social moral standards and capitalize on legitimate opportunities for social controls such as employment, solid romantic relationships, and parenthood. This legitimate pathway will strengthen existing informal social controls and provide opportunities to progress, for

example, in the workplace. On the other hand, even if youth are doing well at school and have solid familial backgrounds they may associate with delinquent peers due to the lure of protection, excitement, status, and power. However, this association may be fleeting since it conflicts with the youth's fundamental pro-social attitudes, morality, and school success. These youth may also find that the rest of the group does not view them as "fitting in." In short, they may do little more than "flirt" with a more deviant lifestyle.

### **Learning to be Criminal: Opportunities**

Associating with delinquent peers offers an opportunity for criminal learning and involvement in crime will reinforce these learning curves. By mixing with delinquents existing anti-social attitudes will also be reinforced. To become criminally active a youth will need to set aside any existing pro-social moral standards s/he may have, and cognitively reconstruct harmful behavior (e.g., gang violence) into acceptable behavior. This process is known as moral disengagement (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). By associating with delinquent others, any existing pro-aggression beliefs and attitudes will be reinforced by peer approval, and lead to positive appraisals of personal deviance. This process will promote the development of information processing biases and deficits in a pro-aggressive direction, and be stored in memory as cognitive schemas to guide future behavior. Such schemas develop primarily during childhood (Huesmann, 1998), but have a lifetime influence and are resistant to change (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; see Collie, Vess, & Murdoch (2007) for a review). Thus, the younger the child is when s/he becomes deviant the more critical and enduring will be the influence. As the youth becomes more involved in criminal activity he/she may also experience an increase in self esteem (from peer reinforcement), and strengthened bonds with delinquent peers. In turn, this reinforces his/her resolve for continued criminal activity.

### **Gang Membership**

The model shows how youth may become involved in criminal activity but avoid joining a gang. Criminal activity may occur independently of, or simultaneously to, gang membership. However, gang membership is likely to occur for reasons over and above those involving becoming delinquent. Gang membership offers protection; possibly from threats from competing criminal entities (e.g., rival drug dealers); it provides social support, offers elevated status, the chance to acquire power, and potentially, excitement. Accompanying gang membership may be rules or social controls that members adhere to—thus providing a form of familial environment. Once a member, the youth has additional opportunities for criminal learning and criminal activity. Of course, hand in hand with these new opportunities for “personal enhancement” come additional chances of victimization and these may lead gang member youth to desire a gang-free life.

### **Desistance of Offending and Leaving the Gang**

As the model shows (see Figure 1), desistance may occur at the criminal activity, or the gang member stage. The youth may give up criminal activity/gang membership in favor of employment and/or stable relationships. Of course these opportunities may be unfavorably influenced if the youth has been prosecuted for criminal acts. In this case the youth’s criminal inclinations will either dispel (from fear of further legal sanctions) or strengthen (from the obstruction that prosecution places on legitimate opportunities). If, however, legitimate activities are reinforced (e.g., opportunities to advance in employment) the youth’s resolve to desist from crime may strengthen and continue. If, however, they collapse (i.e., employment is lost or a relationship breaks up) then the youth may return to criminal involvement and/or gang membership.

This model has the potential to expand research findings at a psychological and criminological level. Because it includes pathways of non-involvement in crime and gangs and concepts of desistance, it allows us to make meaningful comparisons. And, as Klein

(2006) observes, comparisons are too rare in the gang literature. Comparisons can be made between gang members, between abstaining and remaining gang members, and between gang and non gang members. It is also possible to compare neighborhoods by examining the individual characteristics, social factors, and social cognitions of youth living in organized and disorganized areas. Most importantly, it presents the integration of gang related concepts into a coherent structure that integrates criminological and psychological ideas and provides testable hypotheses for future work.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter we have considered the group processes of gang membership. We have examined the norms, roles, relations, social influences, and behavioral effects of gang membership. We have shown that research is dogged by definitional difficulties and that current theoretical approaches have both value and limitations. As a result, we come to the conclusion that empirical research guided by each of the theoretical approaches above reflects the strength and weaknesses of the theory that steers it. Nonetheless, street gang research has so far provided a wealth of empirical findings that offer much to consider. However, one of the problems with such a wealth of work is that confusion flourishes as gang researchers strive to select the best theoretical path forward. This can result in what seems to be more of a competition between theories than a concerted effort to develop and merge the best theoretical propositions. The arguments we present show the gaps in the literature and we suggest that the only real way to plug them is to take a multidisciplinary approach to the problem. By working together to identify reasons why youth join gangs, diverse disciplines will expand our knowledge and develop deeper and more meaningful explanations. Gang membership is complex and diverse and it will only be through the concerted efforts of interdisciplinary approaches to research that we will begin to unravel the vital criminological and psychological strands that construct it.



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Figure 1: A unified theory of gang involvement

