The Modern Gang Reader

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CHAPTER 2

Street Gang Theory and Research: Where Are We Now and Where Do We Go from Here?

Jane Wood ■ Emma Alleyne

Theoretical advances in the study of the emergence and persistence of gangs and gang involvement lag behind the explosion of empirical gang research that has occurred over the past few decades. This article embraces the challenging task of reviewing several theoretical explanations for gang participation and marshals the empirical evidence that supports their value and reveals their limitations. Wood and Alleyne argue that gang researchers would benefit by drawing more from the psychological literature to inject a better understanding of the social psychological processes of joining gangs. Moreover, they offer a new "unified" approach that integrates individual psychological factors and social cognition with criminological concepts. Interestingly, these authors include processes that might lead to desistance from gangs as a crucial stage in their framework.

Introduction

It is a universal given that street gang membership facilitates violent behavior over and above association with offender peers, even prolifically offending peers (Klein, Weerman & Thornberry, 2006). Consequently, the problems street gangs pose to any ordered society are considerable and worthy of research attention. The aim of our review is to draw attention to the significance of existing theories and research examining how street gangs form and the activities they are involved in. Criminologists and sociologists have produced a bounty of excellent papers, but a broadening of discipline involvement will shape and expand knowledge in a way that can only benefit the area. And so, we also present the argument that psychologists need to become more involved in the study of gangs and suggest the way forward by suggesting a theoretical framework that integrates criminological and psychological concepts.

We cannot, in this review, cover all the research on gangs since the literature is so vast. Instead, we have selected the work we consider to be representative and relevant. Neither do we set date constraints. Early gang work such as Thrasher's (1927) and Short and Strodtbeck's (1965) is as relevant today as it was historically and should have a place in any review of gangs. Most of the research we examined was conducted in the U.S.A., and so we only state the country of origin of work conducted elsewhere. As is the case with any review, more questions are raised than resolved. However, we attempt to draw some cohesion into the ongoing debates surrounding literature relating to street gangs. And in doing so, we aim to produce ideas and directions that multidisciplinary approaches to gang research might embrace. . . .

Gang Membership: Criminological Theories

While we need a clear and comprehensive definition that clarifies what a gang is we also need a comprehensive theory to guide empirical work and provide synthesis in explaining why people

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become members of a gang. Criminological theoretical explanations of gang membership span almost a century and provide us with a vast literature. In this section, we review some of the most influential theoretical propositions of involvement in crime and consider their value in explaining gang membership.

Theory of Social Disorganization

While, early interest in gangs was primarily descriptive. Thrasher (1927) paved the way for the explosion of Chicago based research and theory development with his account of why adolescent boys become gang members. Thrasher argued that economic destabilization contributed to *social disorganization*, which in turn, led to the breakdown of conventional social institutions such as the school, the church, and most importantly, the family, which "failed to hold the boy's interest, neglects him or actually forces him onto the street" (p. 340). The gradual erosion of conventional establishments meant they were weakened and unable to satisfy the needs of the people such that they gradually lost the ability to control the behavior of the area's populace. Thrasher maintained that one reason why social institutions failed to satisfy the needs of the populace was because so many people living in disorganized areas were immigrants. Immigrant parents were unable to help their children adapt to their new culture due to a lack of familiarity with local customs. Furthermore, a lack of support from established social orders such as schools failed to compensate for this parental ignorance. Thrasher (1927) neatly set the failure of conventional institutions in opposition to the thrill and excitement offered by unconventional institutions which offered children "the thrill and zest of participation in common interests, more especially corporate action, in hunting, capture, conflict, flight and escape" (p. 32–33). For Thrasher (1927) a gang existed when it became organized, adopted a formal structure, became attached to local territory and involved itself in conflict. Conflict was a pivotal notion for Thrasher (1927), who argued that it resulted in the formation of gangs who created conflict with other gangs and with the conventional social order which opposed them.

Theory of Cultural Transmission

Thrasher's (1927) observations of social disorganization threaded into the succession of gang research that followed. Shaw and McKay (1931, 1942) developed Thrasher's (1927) concepts by arguing that socially disorganized neighborhoods *culturally transmit* criminal traditions which are as transmissible as any other cultural elements. 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 delinquent behavior. In such a cultural climate gang membership becomes a satisfying alternative to unsatisfactory legitimate conventions. If family, school, church and government all fail to adequately provide for young people young people will form indigenous groups such as gangs which provide a social support system in socially disorganized communities (Hill, Howell, Hawkins, & Battin-Pearson, 1999; Lane & Meeker, 2004; Papachristos & Kirk, 2006; Spergel, 1995). This group formation and the criminality that emanates from it are passed from generation to generation via socialization, motivating young people to deviate from conventional norms. Conversely, conventionality dominates middle class areas and so middle class youth are *not* exposed to delinquent traditions and *are* adequately controlled by parents in a stable environment. Consequently for Shaw and McKay (1931) it is the *environment* and not the ethnic identity of the individual that determines involvement in crime.

Theory of Differential Association

Although criticisms of the "Chicago school" of gang research for its exclusive focus on working class criminality (e.g., Cullen, 1984) are justified, the exception to this accusation must be the ideas of Sutherland (1937), Sutherland and Cressey (1960, 1974). Sutherland recognized that criminal behavior is prevalent across all classes and developed a theory of *differential association* where young people develop the attitudes and skills necessary to become delinquent by associating with individuals

who are "carriers" of criminal norms (Sutherland, 1937). The essence of *differential association* is that criminal behavior is learned and the principal part of learning comes from within important personal groups (Sutherland & Cressey, 1960). Exposure to the attitudes of members of personal groups that either favor or reject legal codes influences the attitudes of the individual. And people will go on to commit crimes if they are: exposed more to attitudes that favor law violation than attitudes that favor abiding by the law; exposed to law-violation attitudes early in life; exposed to law-violation attitudes over a prolonged period of time; and exposed to law-violation attitudes from people they like and respect. Once the appropriate attitudes have developed, young people learn the skills of criminality in much the same way as they would learn any skills: or by example and tutelage. Sutherland argued that a principal part of this criminal learning process is derived from small social groups such as gangs.

The appeal of *differential association* is that it not only looks to the environment for explanations of criminal behavior to explain differences in populations that other researchers such as Shaw and McKay (1931, 1942) ignored, [but] Sutherland also considered the transmission and development of psychological constructs such as attitudes and beliefs about crime. However, Sutherland's ideas also have their critics. One is that they fail to specify how much individuals need to favor crime before they become influential in a pro-criminal sense since generally people hold beliefs that justify crime only in certain situations (Agnew, 1995; Akers, 1997). Differential association has also been criticized for stating simply that pro- or anti-criminal attitudes develop through the association with others without explaining *how* this process works (Akers, 1997). Expanding the ideas of differential association by drawing on psychological social learning processes, Akers (1997) proposes that crime is learned through: the development of beliefs that crime is acceptable in some situations; the positive reinforcement of criminal involvement (e.g. approval of friends, financial gains); and the imitation of the criminal behavior of others—especially if they are people the individual values.

Empirical Findings: Social Disorganization, Cultural Transmission, Differential Association: Empirical Evidence

A wealth of empirical evidence lends support to criminological propositions such as *social disorganization* (Shaw & McKay 1930, 1942; Thrasher, 1927), *cultural transmission* of criminogenic norms (Shaw & McKay 1930, 1942) and *differential association* (Sutherland, 1937). Where there are street gangs there is also likely to be poverty, victimization, fear, and social disorganization (Chin, 1996; Goldstein, 1991; Howell & Decker, 1999; Howell, Egley, & Gleason, 2002; Huff, 1996; Klein, 1995; Knox, 1994; Spergel, 1995) and low socio-economic status (Chettleburgh, 2007; Rizzo, 2003). Young people living in neighborhoods with high rates of delinquency are more likely to commit delinquent acts than are their counterparts living in areas of low delinquency (Hill et al., 1999; Hill, Lui, & Hawkins, 2001) and gang members have higher rates of delinquency than their non-gang counterparts *before* becoming involved in gangs (Eitle, Gunkel, & van Gundy, 2004; Esbensen, Huizinga, & Weiher, 1993; Gordon et al., 2004; Huff, 1998; Schneider, 2001; Spergel, 1995). There is also a positive relationship between gang membership and family members who are criminally involved (Eitle et al., 2004; Hill et al., 2001; Kakar, 2005; Maxson, Whitlock, & Klein, 1998; Sirpal, 2002; Sharp et al., 2006), and/or are gang members themselves (Spergel, 1995). Mixing with delinquent peers has been identified as a precursor to gang membership (Amato & Cornell, 2003; Esbensen & Weerman, 2005; Hill et al., 1999, 2001; Kakar, 2005; Maxson et al., 1998; Sharp et al., 2006), as has peer pressure to commit delinquent activities (Esbensen & Weerman, 2005). Also, children/youth that are unable to integrate into societal institutions are more likely to become delinquent and join deviant peer groups as a result (Dukes, Martinez, & Stein, 1997; Hill et al., 1999).

Street youth cultures provide criminal opportunities; provide skills, contacts, and a means of accessing illegal local markets in drugs and stolen

goods (Webster, MacDonald, & Simpson, 2006). They also prove the greatest impediment to desisting from drug use and criminality (Webster et al., 2006). That gangs endure and develop comes from evidence that in many of the world's cities where governance is weak and insecurity and instability dominate, organized groups such as gangs "reign" (Sullivan, 2006). In many of these instances gangs have evolved into complex, third generation gangs who have sophisticated political and social agendas (Sullivan, 2006).

Although several studies seem to support the concepts proposed by the theories outlined above, critics are quick to point out the conceptual shortcomings of this school of thought. It has been accused of seeing people as motivationally empty, without choice, and as mere vessels to be filled with society's impositions (Emler & Reicher, 1995). That gang members exercise their ability to choose is indicated by evidence showing how they drift in and out of legitimate work over time (Hagedorn & Macon, 1998) as the lucrative illegal drug labor market, despite its dangerousness, competes with the low wages, and adverse working conditions of the legitimate labor market (Bourgois, 1995).

There is also evidence suggesting no link between low socio-economic status and gang membership (Eitle et al., 2004) and that gang members may just as easily come from wealthier backgrounds (Spergel, 1995). Having delinquent peers is also not an adequate explanation for gang membership (Thornberry, 1998) although involvement in a social network to which close friends and family members already belong is a key reason why gang members join a gang (Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith, & Tobin, 2003). However, children raised in the same household are also "variably prone" to gang involvement, which Spergel (1995) maintains shows a *personal disorganization* perspective of gang membership. The concept of *social disorganization* is also accused of being tautological; explaining delinquency in terms of disorganization when delinquency is a criterion of disorganization (Emler & Reicher, 1995). Caulfield (1991) is particularly damning of the subcultural approach, arguing that it dictates who will be members of a subcultural society and where they will live, which in turn, determines where researchers will look and thus selection bias. Caulfield (1991) argues that subcultural theorists create images of monsters and devils who must " . . . meet certain criteria—such as being at the lower end of class, race and gender hierarchies" (p 229). It is indeed an irony that subcultural theorists attempting to highlight the inequities of the social structure may also reinforce negative stereotypes of working class peoples and immigrants. Media accounts of gang activity largely ignore the activities of White gangs (Bursik & Grasmick, 1995; Spergel, 1995) and rely primarily on stereotypes (Jankowski, 1991). Consequently, the focus of research on relatively few gangs offers us little assurance that the locations where gangs are found are representative of gang locales or that similar places do not have gangs (Tita, Cohen & Engberg, 2005). As Sanday (1990) notes, in the U.S.A., a group of middle class youth apprehended on charges of a (gang) rape had many of the classic hallmarks of a gang including a name, regular criminal activities, and a "turf." At the trial the judge noted similarities between this group and other gangs and yet the Gang Crimes Unit showed no interest in this particular gang. This, Sanday (1990) argues, was due to the group emerging from a university fraternity. If social researchers concentrate on areas where the socio-economically deprived and ethnic populations live, there is a danger that explanations of gang membership will be framed solely by socio-economic deprivation and ethnicity. Clearly we need a broader perspective if we are to adequately explain why people join gangs.

Strain Theory

The central concept of *strain theory* is that society sets universal goals for its populace and then offers the ability to achieve them to a limited number of people. The resultant inequality of opportunity causes a strain on cultural goals. This, Merton (1938) proposes, leads to anomie (Durkheim, 1893); a breakdown in the cultural structure due to an acute division between prescribed cultural norms and the ability of members to act in line with them (Merton, 1938). The consequence of anomie is that people adapt to their circumstances by adopting a specific form of behavior (Merton, 1938). Cohen (1955) depicts gang members as

working class youth who experience strain resulting in status frustration. Status frustration may be resolved by the youth associating with similar others in order to "strike out" against middle class ideals and standards. In turn, this leads to the formation of a delinquent subculture where instant gratification, fighting, and destructive behavior become the new values. It is a rebellion that is considered to be right precisely because it is wrong in the norms of the larger culture. Cohen argued that a child experiences frustration and tension due to the unequal opportunities offered in a meritocratic society that claims to operate on egalitarian principles of equal opportunity. Strain results when individuals are inadequately socialized to accept the legitimate means available to them. Inadequate socialization includes: unstructured leisure time, a failure in the educational system to provide sufficient resources, and the child's misunderstanding of what school requires of him or her. Further examples of inadequate socialization include meager community resources and educational toys and facilities in the home. The child experiencing these social deprivations gradually sinks to the bottom of the educational hierarchy and experiences feelings of status frustration involving self-hatred, guilt, loss of self-esteem, self-recrimination, and anxiety. The child blames him/herself for the failure and copes with it by seeking alternative avenues for status achievement such as street gang membership (Cohen, 1955).

Theory of Differential Opportunity

Taking a different perspective on the same issue, Cloward and Ohlin (1960) found that gang members blamed the system rather than themselves for their social failure, and "waged war" against society through expressions of anger and fighting, achieving honor through a form of "macho" bravado, and developing a formidable reputation. Although *differential opportunity* is often cited as a general theory of delinquency it began as a theory of gangs (Knox, 1994). In this theory, Cloward and Ohlin (1960), like Merton (1938), explain a class difference in opportunity, but unlike Merton (1938), Cloward and Ohlin argue that opportunity *for* delinquency is also limited in availability. Such differential availability of *illegitimate* means to resolve strain means that middle class children lack the opportunity to learn how to offend. Lower class children do have this opportunity and so offend more frequently. Cloward and Ohlin (1960) argue that Shaw and McKay (1931, 1942) failed to observe a differential opportunity in learning how to offend and therefore simply assumed (wrongly) that middle classes had *less inclination* to offend. Cloward and Ohlin agree with Sutherland's (1937) ideas that young people learn how to offend from older, more experienced offenders. However, they point out that Sutherland failed to consider how access to "criminal schools" varied across the social structure while their theory unites two sociological traditions: *access to legitimate means* (Merton, 1938; Cohen, 1955) and *access to illegitimate means* (Sutherland, 1937). Agnew (1992) developed strain theory further by identifying specific forms of strain (irrespective of class): "(1) the actual or anticipated failure to achieve positively valued goals, (2) the actual or anticipated removal of positively valued stimuli, (3) the actual or anticipated presentation of negative stimuli" (p. 74). Each of these strains may have an increasing effect on delinquency and so there will be individual differences in response to the strain experienced (Agnew, 1992).

Strain Theory and Differential Opportunity: Empirical Evidence

Each of these strains threads through the gang literature. For instance, research shows that gangs compensate for strain by providing illegitimate means to achieve goals that are not achievable due to shortcomings in employment and education (Klemp-North, 2007). Gang members are likely to have lost positive role models since they often come from disorganized families and many have lost contact with a parent due to death, separation, or divorce (Klemp-North, 2007). Gang members are also more exposed to negative influences, such as drugs and delinquent peers (Sirpal, 2002; Klemp-North, 2007). Preteen stress exposure has been identified as a risk factor for gang membership (where deviance acts as a coping mechanism

for unattainable goals, Eitle et al., 2004) as have poor parenting skills (Eitle et al., 2004; Hill et al., 1999; Sharp et al., 2006; Thornberry et al., 2003), and mental health issues (Hill et al., 1999). The inability to counteract any or all of the three types of strain with appropriate coping mechanisms may mean gang membership becomes a coping strategy for negative emotions such as anger, frustration, and anxiety (Eitle et al., 2004; Klemp-North, 2007), the need for personal development (Spergel, 1995), and a lack of confidence and self-esteem (Dukes, Martinez, & Stein, 1997). Some researchers claim there is no relationship between gang membership and self-esteem (Bjerregaard & Smith, 1993). However, other findings show that when the gang's esteem rises (due to success in delinquent and antisocial activities) so too does the self-esteem of previously low esteem gang members (Dukes et al., 1997).

One problem with strain theory is that although it explains some of the reasons why youth may join gangs it fails to explain why most lower class youth eventually lead law-abiding lives even though their economic status remains static (Goldstein, 1991) or why many youth who experience strain do not offend (Webster et al., 2006). Thirty three percent of youth living in deprived areas and who had never offended had experienced significant trauma such as, acrimonious parental divorce, domestic violence, parental institutionalization in prison or mental health units, family estrangement from siblings, and being bought up in the care system (Webster et al., 2006). Moreover, far from rebelling against middle class norms, many gang members actually endorse middle class values (Klein, 1995; Sikes, 1997). In an ethnographic study of female gang members, Sikes (1997) noted how most members expressed the wish to enter various professions such as nursing or teaching, despite a low attendance at school, a varied criminal record and a realistic chance of being killed while engaged in gang activity. Many gang members also spend a great deal of their time engaged in conventional pursuits by taking steps to find a job, taking part in sports, and making plans for the future such as enlisting in the Navy (Hughes & Short, 2005).

This research implies that many gang members are optimistic in their expectations for their futures and contrasts with the depressed outlook one might expect from working class youth who recognize that their chances of legitimate success are blocked by the unequal class system imposed on them. It would seem that strain theorists overestimate many deviant youths' philosophic consideration of their sociological reality. It seems more likely that delinquent youth act more in accordance with the current state of their lives than they do with perceptions of a future blocked by social inequity.

A further criticism of strain theory is that research shows that youth who have the most money supplied by their families (i.e., pocket money) are often those who become involved in gangs (Knox & Tromanhauser, 1991). This research questions the concept that the lower the economic status of the individual, the greater likelihood there is of their subcultural affiliation. Research also shows that families of non-gang youth are more likely to help their children with homework than are families of gang involved youth (Knox et al., 1992), which may mean that parental *time* rather than money is a protective factor in whether youth become gang involved.

Clearly, strain theory fails to account for many of the findings regarding gang membership. The notable (and often overlooked) work conducted by Short and Strodtbeck (1965) compared white gangs, black gangs, lower class youth, and middle class youth (over 500 in each group). Data was collected from multiple sources using a variety of methodologies, including: systematic observations, interviews with gang and non-gang members, and reports from gang workers. Not a single gang resembled any one of the theories proposed by Sutherland, Cohen, and Cloward and Ohlin. Short and Strodtbeck (1965) also raised the question of just which culture it is that delinquents presumably oppose. They also challenged the assumption that gangs oppose the middle class white American culture since so many ethnic minorities adhere to their own cultures.

Control, or Social Bond Theory

Control theory (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Hirschi, 1969) neatly diverts the attention of research away from why offenders offend, to why

conformists *do not* offend? Where strain theory's central premise is the *presence* of negative relationships in the development of delinquency, control theory focuses on the *absence* of key relationships (Agnew, 1992; Klemp-North, 2007). Like strain theory and social disorganization theory, control theory posits that communities with a deteriorating social structure are a breeding ground for delinquency. The central contention of control theory is that people are inherently disposed to offend because offending offers short term gains (e.g., immediate money) and the central aim of those with criminal dispositions is to satisfy desires in the quickest and simplest way possible (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). Offending is prevented by the social bond, which operates on psychological constructs such as the individual's conscience. However, a breakdown in social bonds during childhood leaves a child free to act on his/her natural inclinations without negative emotional repercussions.

Initially, control theory emphasized the restraining power the justice system had on delinquency (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Hirschi, 1969) and is therefore fundamentally tied up with deterrence theories. However, control theorists generally agree that conforming to legitimate social structures does not occur simply because social norms are *imposed on* people via societal processes (e.g., the justice system and deterrence). Social norms are effective because people *internalize* them through a socialization process where formal sanctions are reinforced by informal sanctions (Fagan & Meares, 2008). Hirschi (1969) noted that internalizing norms is mediated by attachment to others because adequately socialized children are concerned about the reaction of significant others to their behavior. The child is committed to others and does all s/he can to protect precious relationships, including internalizing significant others' rules in the form of self-control. "Insofar as the child respects (loves and fears) his parents, and adults in general, he will accept their rules" (Hirschi, 1969, p. 30). By abstaining from immediate gratification of desires to achieve long-term goals the child also shows commitment to a positive future.

Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) developed this idea by explaining in their general theory of crime that the cause of low self-control and hence delinquency is inadequate child rearing and can occur in any social class. Adequate child rearing includes: monitoring the child's behavior and recognizing and punishing deviant behavior. The result will be " . . . 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" (p 97).

Adequate child rearing is vulnerable to impediments including: parents who do not care for their child, parents that care but who are unable to provide adequate supervision, parents able to provide both care and supervision but who are unable to identify a behavior as wrong, or parents who are disinclined or unable to provide punishment for the behavior (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). To their credit, the authors emphasize that supervision and punishment should be conducted in a loving way and that parental disappointment is a more effective control mechanism than corporal punishment. Thus, they do not endorse the harsh and punitive sanctions that control theorists have been accused of favoring (e.g., Currie, 1985).

Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) suggest that homes most at risk of producing delinquent children are those with criminal parents because they fail to recognize their children's criminal behavior and single parents because the lone parent is unable to adequately monitor the child's behavior and lacks psychological support from another adult. Introducing a stepparent may not improve the situation as the new family member may have little time or affection for the child which will create familial discordance and do little to alleviate child rearing problems. Working mothers also put children at risk because they cannot adequately supervise their children. Schools may help socialize children, but only if parents do not oppose any attempts to instill self-discipline into the child.

Control Theory: Empirical Evidence

Although Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) do not directly address the involvement of young people in gangs, social control theory has been used to predict

the onset of gang membership (Thornberry, 2006) and has been found to moderate and predict levels of self-reported delinquency (Huebner & Betts, 2002). A lack of commitment to a positive future is evidenced by gang members showing little or no commitment at school (Hill et al., 1999; Brownfield, 2003). However, more in line with strain theory, gang members *do* show commitment to delinquent peers (Esbensen et al., 1993). Gang members also experience an absence of parental role models and family disorganization (Klemp-North, 2007), and poor parental management skills (Eitle et al., 2004; Hill et al., 1999; Sharp et al., 2006; Thornberry et al., 2003) particularly if it occurs alongside a child's impulsivity and risk-seeking tendencies (Esbensen et al., 2001). Yet, since poor parental management is likely to be a causal factor for impulsivity and risk-seeking, it is pointless considering these variables separately (Gibbs, Giever, & Martin, 1998; Lattimore, Tittle, & Grasmick, 2006).

On the face of it evidence that youth from single parent families, families with one parent and other adults and youth with no parents are more likely to become gang members than are youth from two parent (even stepparent) households (Hill, Howell, Hawkins, & Battin-Pearson, 1999) seems to support control theory. However, family process variables have been found to play a much smaller role in gang membership (Thornberry et al., 2003) than control theory suggests. Research also shows that bonds with parents (attachment) and poor family management are not as strongly related to gang membership as family structure is (Hill et al., 1999). Even though parental supervision relates to gang membership, the relationship is only very modest (LeBlanc & Lanctot, 1998). This suggests that familial control is not as pivotal a factor in gang membership as control theory suggests. Even in families where parents attempt to control their children, discipline is not a simple solution to delinquency since it can lead to a greater likelihood of delinquency *regardless* of parental attachments (Wells & Rankin, 1988). Indeed, many gang members claim they were often physically punished by authoritarian fathers until they either left home, or retaliated with similar aggression (Klein, 1995).

There is also evidence that even within gangs legitimate social norms continue to be acknowledged. For example, gang members provide financial aid (albeit from drug trade profits) to disadvantaged communities and provide law and order services, security escorts for recreational programs and assist impoverished households by supplying groceries, free transportation and manpower (Venkatesh, 1997). It is also paradoxical that, while gang membership may be considered to occur because of a *breakdown* in formal and informal social control, research offers us examples of gangs that *provide* social control. For instance, the shared aims of gang leaders and upstanding citizens in middle class neighborhoods have resulted in a more stable and safe environment because gangs offer social control to the community and have been known to "police" neighborhood events even better than the police (Patillo, 1998).

Also, although control theory proposes that informal social control breaks down and offending results, the theory fails to adequately explain how informal social controls might be re-established. For instance, some social control theorists argue that a propensity for criminal involvement is stable throughout life and desistance from crime only occurs when there is a change in opportunity for crime (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). However, evidence shows that it is the effect of social controls that urge people to stop offending. For instance, gang members leave the gang in favor of fatherhood (Moloney, Mackenzie, Hunt & Joe-Laidler, 2009) and employment, military service and marriage all contribute to a cessation of offending (Sampson & Laub, 2001). It therefore seems that social controls may be more flexible than control theory suggests and that even if informal social controls *break down* to the extent that youth become involved in delinquency, they *maintain* influence during the period of delinquency and can be *re-established* sufficiently to facilitate desistance. This supports the argument that conventional theories fail to incorporate a social contextual dimension to the study of gangs (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993; Jankowski, 1991; Spergel, 1995).

A Role for Psychology?

Overall, criminological theories used to explain gang membership pay scant attention to the social

psychological processes involved in joining a gang (Thornberry et al., 2003). Some researchers have examined the psychological characteristics of gang members by, for example, looking at the interaction effects of neighborhood and personality traits of gang members. Youth who live in disorganized neighborhoods (i.e., with a high turnover of residents) and who have psychopathic tendencies (i.e. higher levels of hyperactivity and lower levels of anxiety and pro-social tendencies) are five times more likely to become gang members than youth without this configuration of traits (Dupéré, Lacourse, Willms, Vitaro, & Tremblay, 2007). Such youth are also less sensitive to parental attempts at supervision (Dupéré et al., 2007). Gang membership is even more likely if these youth live in an adverse family environment (Lacourse et al., 2006). We also know from research findings that gang members hold more negative attitudes to authority (Kakar, 2008) such as the police (Lurigio, Flexon & Greenleaf, 2008). Risk factors for gang membership also function on individual differences such as lower IQ levels (Spergel, 1995); learning difficulties and mental health problems (Hill et al., 1999) and low self-esteem (Dukes et al., 1997).

More recently, interactional theory (Thornberry, 1987; Thornberry & Krohn, 2001) has elaborated earlier criminological theories by proposing that gang membership results from a reciprocal relationship between the individual and: peer groups, social structures such as poor neighborhood and poor family, weakened social bonds, and a learning environment that fosters and reinforces delinquency (Hall, Thornberry, & Lizotte, 2006). Gang membership may result from *selection* where gangs select and recruit members who are already delinquent; from *facilitation* where gangs provide opportunities for delinquency to youth who were not delinquent beforehand (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 high-risk youth who, as gang members, become more delinquent (Gatti et al., 2005; Thornberry et al., 1993).

Interactional theory also acknowledges that even within gangs, not all members are alike. For instance some gang members are transient and some are stable. High levels of delinquency before joining a gang positively relates to the length of time a member remains in a gang, whereas youth who were not delinquent before joining a gang are more likely to be temporary members (Gatti et al., 2005). Consequently, individual differences seem to be gaining conceptual importance in the development of gang theory and as such there is a role for psychology to add to this theoretical development.

There are many questions that psychology could address. Personality traits (e.g. Dupéré et al., 2007) already seem to be influential in determining who will join a gang. However, we also need to understand more about how and if, informal social controls are internalized and whether they may be either discarded in favor of new norms (such as gang rules) or adapted and used alongside new ones. As children grow they may seek a status that differs from the one prescribed by the legitimate social order taught by parents and teachers (Anderson, 1999). Young people may be tempted into gangs because they offer the potential to gain respect and status (Anderson, 1999). Knox (1994) described gangs as exerting two types of social power that attract youth: coercive power—the threat or actual use of force and violence; and the power to pay, buy, or impress, and to delegate status and rank to its members. As such, gangs reflect universal needs among young people for status, identity and companionship (Klein, 1995). However, people experience moral conflicts when they come across benefits requiring immoral behavior (Bandura, 1990). As a result, people engage in what Bandura (2002) described as moral disengagement strategies, "cognitive restructuring of inhumane conduct into benign or worthy behavior" (p. 101). We do know that youth will set aside their moral standards if by doing so they will be accepted by a chosen group (Emler & Reicher, 1995). As such, social cognitive processes such as moral disengagement may help explain the process of *how* youth disengage from the informal social controls they have learned in favor of the rewards gang membership offers. There is also the possibility of social learning aspects to gang membership. Young boys look up to gang members, mimic them, and aspire to gang membership (Hughes & Short, 2005) and gang films depicting characters

rewarded for gang-like behaviors act as a blueprint for young aspiring gang members (Przemieniecki, 2005). Consequently, youth may adapt, modify, or discard their existing social controls in favor of what they *perceive* as the attractive or even "glamorous" attributes of gang membership. What is not clear is why gang membership continues to be attractive to youth when gang members, relative to non-gang members, have a greater chance of violent victimization, experience higher levels of sexual assault (for males and females), are more likely to experience violent dating victimization, and suffer serious injuries from fighting (Taylor, Freng, Esbensen, & Peterson, 2008; Gover, Jennings, & Tewksbury, 2009).

We clearly need to understand more about gang membership. For example, are female gangs mere satellites of male gangs as they are often regarded (Hagedorn & Moore, 2006) or are they independent entities who have their own set of motivations for membership? If so are these motivations similar or dissimilar to those of their male counterparts? Also, why is sexual assault in the home a greater antecedent to female gang membership than it is for male membership (Chesney-Lind, Sheldon & Joe, 1996)? Further, we need to understand more about the changing structure of gangs. For instance, why are many gangs becoming increasingly multi racial and multi ethnic (Howell, Egley & Gleason, 2002; cf Howell, 2007; Starbuck, Howell, & Lindquist, 2001)?

However, we must also be aware of the pitfalls of the gang myths (Howell, 2007) peddled out by sections of the media or even by gang members themselves who, for protective purposes, are intent on appearing more dangerous than they are (Felson, 2006). Such myths can mislead even the most conscientious researchers and undermine research findings (Howell, 2007). It also needs to be considered that individual differences do not apply *solely* at the individual level. No two gangs are alike and community experiences of gang problems vary widely. Such variance is frustrating to the media and others who thrive on simplicity and sweeping generalizations (Esbensen & Tuisinki, 2007). The only way we can counteract the perpetuation of myths and errors is by rigorous *theoretically derived* empirical work that includes psychological factors relevant to street gang membership. So, yes, there is a definite role for psychology in street gang research.

The Role for Psychology

Too much research has ignored theory and launched itself into findings that offer some insight but do little to marry the literature and expand our overall understanding of the etiology of gang membership. Why do gangs form? They probably form to fulfill the needs that any adolescents have: peer friendship, pride, identity development, enhancement of self-esteem, excitement, the acquisition of resources, and goals that may not, due to low-income environments, be available through legitimate means (Goldstein, 2002). They may offer a strong psychological sense of community, a physical and psychological neighborhood, a social network, and social support (Goldstein, 1991). In short, gangs form for the same reasons that any other group forms (Goldstein, 2002). Social psychology offers a wealth of comprehensive theories explaining the dynamics of groups and each offers the potential for fruitful research into the question of gang formation (Goldstein, 1991, 2002). For instance *social comparison theory* (Festinger, 1954; Schachter, 1959) tells us that people group together because doing so provides useful comparisons of personal attitudes, behavior, etc. with those of others. *Social exchange theory* (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) is where group membership is valued according to its benefits and costs. *Self categorization theory* (Turner, 1987) explains how a person's sense of self is derived from learning what it means to be a member of a specific group. Other theories such as *social identity theory* (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), *social dominance theory* (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) and *realistic conflict theory* (Sherif, 1966) offer us the potential to explain inter gang conflict (Goldstein, 2002). However, no *one* theory, either criminological or psychological, has the potential to fully explain the etiology of gang membership. A theoretical framework specific to gang membership that integrates sociological, criminological and psychological perspectives would do much to guide research and develop theory further.

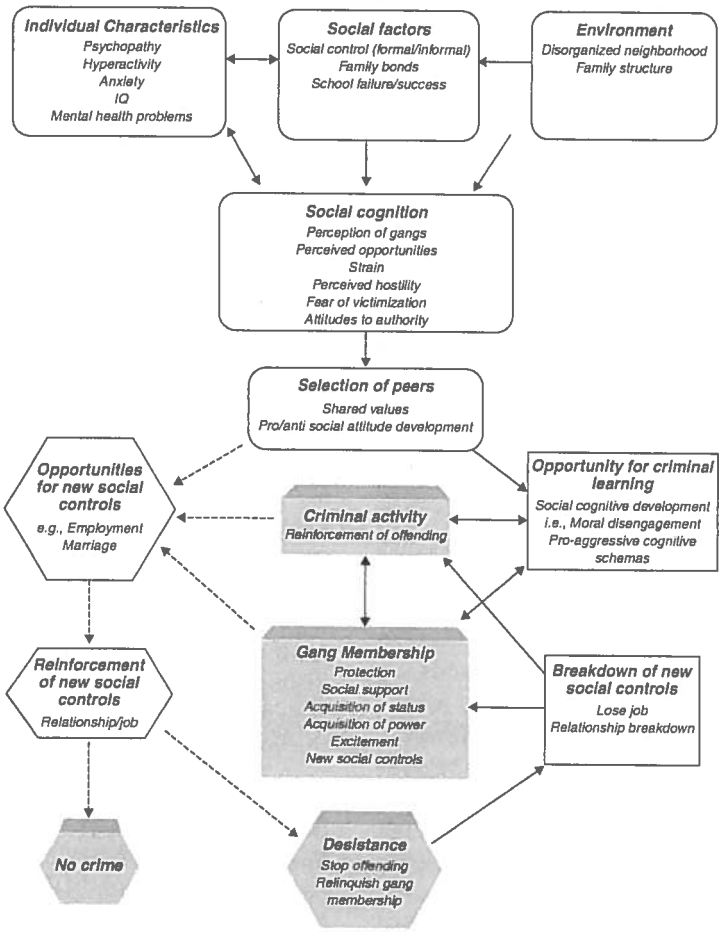
Theory Knitting

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 phenomenon that appear to be diverse, to provide a clear and comprehensible account of the world. Theory knitting refers to integrating the best *existing* ideas into a new framework (Ward & Hudson, 1998). It involves identifying the common and unique ideas from existing theories so that good ideas are not lost (Ward & Beech, 2004). An integrated theory of gang membership should therefore bring together the good ideas contained in current theories into a model that provides explanatory power and *testable* hypotheses. Such a model will facilitate the examination of specific aspects of gang membership and the further development of theory.

An Integrated Model of Gang Membership

With this in mind we present a *very preliminary framework* of the processes leading to and from gang membership. This framework draws together concepts from criminological theory and integrates them with relevant *psychological* factors (see Fig. 2.1). It includes concepts from similar models (e.g., Howell & Egley, 2005) to provide a more comprehensive framework with testable hypotheses which

Figure 2.1 A Unified Theory of Gang Involvement



may be used to guide empirical examinations of why youth *may or may not* join gangs. By illustrating the pathway into criminality and/or gang membership together with alternative non-criminal pathways, and pathways out of criminality and/or gang membership, this model provides a more all-round conceptualization of criminality, gang membership and non-criminal involvement. And it is the inclusion of alternative pathways together with key psychological and criminological factors which distinguishes it from other similar models.

Social and Individual Factors

As the model shows, *social factors, individual characteristics* and *environment* are important starting points for a youth's social development. Family structure and type of neighborhood may go hand in hand since families with poor or unstable structures (i.e., frequent changes in parental romantic partners) are potentially more likely to live in disorganized neighborhoods. However, this model also allows for the consideration of *organized* neighborhoods as starting points for gang involved youth, since even if the neighborhood and family are stable, individual factors such as psychopathic personality traits, high levels of anxiety, hyperactivity, low IQ, low self-esteem, and/or mental health problems may influence an inclination for gang membership. Environmental factors will affect social factors such as the levels of formal and informal control. Disorganized neighborhoods may be difficult to police (formal control) and informal social controls such as parental supervision may be problematic depending on family structure, which, in turn, may weaken family bonds. If environmental factors influence levels of informal control then they will also have an indirect effect on school performance, since youth who are poorly supervised are less likely to succeed at school. Organized neighborhoods, on the other hand, may have higher levels of formal social control and more stable families. However, individual factors will affect social factors regardless of the type of neighborhood. Youth who: have psychopathic traits, are hyperactive, have high levels of anxiety, have low IQ, and mental health problems will present more social challenges for families, thus leading to a decrease in informal social control, and a strain on family bonds. These individual factors will also affect the youth's ability to perform at school and the school's ability to manage the youth. In turn, school failure, weak family bonds, and social controls, may impact on a youth's levels of anxiety, mental health problems and self-esteem.

Social Perception

Individual factors and social factors will shape the youth's *social perception* of his/her world. The presence of gangs in the neighborhood will help shape a youth's attitudes and beliefs about gang membership and crime. If gangs are not active in the neighborhood, youth will develop perceptions of gang membership and crime from media images or from vicarious experience such as associating with youth from neighborhoods where gangs are active (e.g., at school). In conjunction with perceptions of gangs will be the youth's perception of the availability of legitimate opportunities. Personal failure at school and the likely associated low self-esteem will increase a youth's negative perceptions of the chance to take advantage of available legitimate opportunities, and may lead to strain. Neighborhoods peppered with gangs and crime may also make the youth fearful of victimization, which coupled with perceptions of limited opportunities, may lead to perceptions that the world is a hostile place. Negative attitudes to authority may develop if youth attribute their school failure to school 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 and see them as failing (or not bothering) to protect people in poor neighborhoods. Perceptions of social environment and shared values such as a mutual like/dislike of school, mutual attitudes to authority, and mutual fear of victimization will influence the youth's selection of peers.

Selection of Peers

The *selection of peers* will foster and strengthen the youth's existing attitudes and social cognitions. Youth who are doing well at school and who have a

solid relationship with parents who supervise him/her will associate with peers who share these attributes (regardless of neighborhood structure and crime rates). These associations will strengthen the youth's pro-social moral standards which will make them less inclined to morally disengage. Youth who associate with pro-social peer groups are also likely to capitalize on further legitimate opportunities for informal social controls such as employment, solid romantic relationships and parenthood, and so they avoid criminal involvement. This legitimate pathway will strengthen legitimate informal social controls and provide youth with 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 be tempted to associate with delinquent peers due to the lure of protection, excitement, status, and power. However, this association may be fleeting since there will be conflict between the youth's existing pro-social attitudes, morality, and school success, and the group ethos. These youth may also find that the rest of the group does not view them as "fitting in." In short, these youth may do little more than "flirt" with a more deviant lifestyle.

Opportunity for Criminal Learning

Association with delinquent peers means that the youth is provided with an *opportunity for criminal learning* and criminal involvement is likely to follow, which provides further criminal learning opportunities. The selection of delinquent peers will foster any existing anti-social attitudes the youth has. To become criminally active a youth will need to set aside any pro-social moral standards s/he may have so that harmful behavior is cognitively reconstructed into acceptable behavior (i.e. moral disengagement). In addition, by associating with delinquent peers, the youth is likely to develop pro-aggression beliefs and attitudes that, in the presence of pro-aggressive reinforcement (e.g., peer approval), will result in positive appraisal of personal aggression. These attitudes and beliefs, in turn, foster the development of information processing biases and deficits in a pro-aggressive direction, and are stored in memory as cognitive schemas to guide future behavior. These schemas develop primarily during childhood (Huesmann, 1998), may have a lifetime influence and are resistant to change (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; see Collie, Vess, & Murdoch (2007) for a review). This implies that because the peer group's influence occurs at such a *critical* stage in the youth's life, it may well extend beyond shaping the youth's social cognitive *development* to exert an influence that is *lifelong*. As the youth becomes more involved in criminal activity he/she may also experience an increase in his/her self-esteem, and a strengthening of bonds with delinquent peers. In turn, this will all bolster his/her resolve for involvement in criminal activity.

Gang Membership

Our model shows how youth may take a pathway into criminal activity which does not necessarily include gang membership. Criminal activity may occur *independently of*, or *simultaneously to*, joining a gang. However, gang membership is likely to occur for reasons *over and above* those underlying involvement in criminal activity. Gang membership offers additional protection; possibly from threats stemming from competing criminal entities (e.g., rival drug dealers); it provides social support, offers elevated status, the chance to acquire power, and opportunities for excitement. Gang membership may also bring with it sets of rules or new social controls that members are expected to abide by—thus providing a form of familial environment. As a gang member, the youth is exposed to further opportunities for criminal learning, and s/he will become even more involved in 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

As our model shows (see Fig. 2.1), desistance may occur at the criminal activity, or the gang member stage. The youth may relinquish his/her involvement in criminal activity or gang membership as they take up opportunities for informal social control such as employment and/or stable

relationships. Of course these opportunities may be adversely affected if the youth has been caught and prosecuted for criminal acts. In this case the youth's criminal inclination will either dissipate (from fear of further legal repercussions) or strengthen (from the obstruction that prosecution puts in the way of legitimate opportunities). If, however, the newly acquired social controls are reinforced (e.g., opportunities to advance in employment) the youth's resolve to desist from crime may strengthen and desistance will continue. If, however, they break down (i.e., employment is lost or a relationship breaks up) then the youth may return to his/her previous lifestyle (i.e., criminal involvement and/or gang membership).

Although this model is in its *very early stages* it has the potential to expand research findings regarding gang membership and delinquency at both a psychological and a criminological level. Because it includes concepts of non involvement in crime and gangs and concepts of desistance, it allows us to make *meaningful comparisons*. As Klein (2006) so rightly observes, comparisons are all too rare in the gang literature. We can make comparisons between gang members, between abstaining and remaining gang members, and between gang and non-gang members. It is also possible to make comparisons between neighborhoods by examining the individual characteristics, social factors, and social cognitions of youth living in organized and disorganized neighborhoods. We do not suggest that this model is a panacea to all the gaps in the literature but it is a starting point and it can be developed and expanded as findings based on its concepts shed light on old and new ideas. Most importantly, it presents the integration of gang-related concepts into a coherent structure that integrates criminological and psychological ideas. Importantly, it provides us with *testable hypotheses* and we are currently engaged in research examining some of these.

Conclusion

This review considered the role of theory and research in understanding why youth join gangs and it has identified a large number of problematic issues that need to be overcome. It has shown that research is dogged by definitional difficulties and that current theoretical approaches have both value and limitations. As a result, empirical research that is guided by each of the theoretical approaches we have reviewed reflects both their value and their limitations. Nonetheless, street gang research has provided us with a wealth of empirical findings that presents us with much to consider. However, one of the problems with such a wealth of work is that confusion results 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 have presented show the gaps in the literature and we suggest how a multidisciplinary approach might plug them. There is a role for psychology in gang research, and if psychologists and criminologists work together to identify the reasons why youth join gangs, we will expand our knowledge and develop deeper and more meaningful explanations than are currently available. With this in mind we have presented a preliminary theoretical model of how youth may become involved in gangs. Gang research is vital and so it cannot afford to be marginalized by any discipline that might have light to shed on at least some of its multiple factors.

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