

HOW DO FEMALES MAKE SENSE OF THEIR EXPERIENCES OF BEING INVOLVED IN GANG ACTIVITY?

Rachel Couper

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ABSTRACT

Female gang involvement continues to be a largely under researched topic, particularly within the UK and understandings are often based on the perspectives of male participants. Furthermore, media discourses continue to be individualistic and blaming, and often fail to consider the impact of the wider context on a person's experiences. Taking a critical realist – social constructionist epistemological position, this research aims to contribute to the understanding of female gang involvement. This study recruited four young women who had previous experiences of gang involvement. Participants were interviewed about their experiences of gang involvement, factors that influenced them to become involved and what helped them transition out of a gang. An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was carried out and four super-ordinate themes were identified, which were: *getting involved*; *'the circle of life'*, *getting involved*; *'survival, being involved*; *'a double edged sword'*, *getting out and staying out*. The findings of this study suggest that growing up around gangs and a failure to have needs met influence young women to become involved in gangs. Experiences of being involved were framed as a 'double-edged sword', as the participants described both positive and negative experiences. Although some experiences of gang involvement were experienced as being positive, the all or nothingness of gangs, sexism, and experiences of violence and betrayal within relationships, made it extremely difficult for these young women to survive, and thrive, within this context. These negative experiences lead them to question life within the gang. However, getting out was described as a complex process, particularly because of the permanency of gang involvement and adverse social contexts. The implications of this research, for clinical practice and future research, are outlined.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

There has been a heightened sense of concern within society surrounding female gang involvement, yet significant gaps exist within the literature, as very little is currently known about female experiences of gang involvement, particularly within the UK. Female voices remain unheard within current discourses surrounding gang involvement and the ways in which females are affected is often ignored, simplified or biased. There is a need for first-hand accounts to capture the lived experiences and to offer richer understandings. The current research will consider how a person's experiences relate to the reasons for becoming involved in a gang, experiences of being involved, and what influences individuals to leave, purely from a female perspective. I begin this chapter with a review of relevant literature, pertaining to existing perspectives of female gang involvement, while critically examining the dominant discourses that exist within our society.

1.1 Literature Review

Through a critical appraisal of the literature, I present the current prevalent ideas within this domain and will demonstrate how the current study aims to address gaps within the existing UK based research. This review was based on literature identified within the following databases; PsychARTICLES, PsychINFO, and Science Direct. Search terms, which were combined using AND, included: females, young women, girls, women, gangs, gang activity, gang affiliation, gang involvement. The abstracts were read and articles that were not considered to be relevant to the study were excluded. Subsequently, a 'snowballing' technique was adopted to identify relevant references, which did not emerge from the original search. An internet-based search was also administered, to obtain non-academic material, including newspaper articles, publications from non-statutory organisations and government legislation.

1.2 Definition

Considerable debate has occurred around the definition of a gang. Although most researchers consider engagement in criminal or irresponsible behaviour to be a benchmark of gang involvement, there is a lack of agreement in regards what constitutes a gang. Leading researchers have been unable to develop one coherent definition and within their analyses, they have highlighted flaws across existing classifications (e.g. Miller, 1980; Spergel, 1995; Klein, 1995; Short, 1996).

Thrasher (1927/1967), who was a pioneering researcher in the area of gangs following his series of observations and interviews with Chicago gangs, offers an alternative definition of a gang;

“an interstitial group originally formed spontaneously and then integrated through conflict. It is characterised by the following types of behavior: meeting face to face, milling, movement through space as a unit, conflict, and planning. The result of this collective behaviour is the development of tradition, unreflective internal structure, esprit de corps, solidarity, morale, group awareness, and attachment to a local territory” (Thrasher, 1927, p46).

Thrasher does not consider delinquency to be a defining feature of a gang and instead argues that gangs can *facilitate* criminal behaviour. More recent research comparing gang involved and non-involved young people has identified serious criminal involvement as a factor which differentiates gangs from other groups of youths (Bjerregaard & Smith, 1993; Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Esbensen, Huizinga & Weilher, 1993; Klein, 1995; Fagan 1989, 1990; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte & Chard-Wierschem, 1993; Winfree, Fuller, Vigil & Mays, 1992).

A social constructionist perspective recognises the fluidity and transience of gangs, which often evolve in responses to social structures, while challenging discourses around gangs that vilify, criminalise and label young people (Becker, 1974). This perspective is careful not to make assumptions based on stereotypes, while taking into account the reasons for some groups being more at risk of gang

involvement than others. The self-nomination technique allows individuals to define themselves as being part of a gang. However, it is likely that the different perceptions of the meaning of a gang filter down to those who are involved, which may account for the challenges in accessing gang members within research. A number of researchers have worked to overcome this challenge. Esbensen (2000) highlights different features of a gang; (a) has more than two members who are usually aged between eleven and twenty-five, (b) a common identity is shared between members, (c) the group exhibits permanence over time, (d) members are involved in illegal activity. Esbensen argues that involvement in illegal activity is required to differentiate gangs from other groups. Young and colleagues (2007) experienced difficulties in identifying female gang members, which led them to extend their criteria to “group offending” (p 3). A wider definition can be more encompassing, however, there are likely to still be inconsistencies in individuals’ perceptions of whether this applies to them and comparisons with other research may be limited due to varying definitions between studies.

There are challenges associated with widening the definition within research. Esbensen and colleagues (2001) pose the question; ‘*when is a gang a gang and why does it matter?*’ (p 106). They explain that a coherent definition is required to inform prevention and intervention strategies. Resource allocation and public concern depends on the magnitude of a problem; therefore gang activity is at risk of being under or overestimated. Furthermore, understandings of what constitutes a gang differ across police forces and agencies working with young people, which is problematic, as some young people may be at risk of falling through the gaps of services, while others are more susceptible to obtaining harsher forms of punishment (XLP, 2013).

1.3 Overview of Research

Increasing attention has been paid to the phenomenon of gangs, across research, media, and policy (Hallsworth & Young, 2008). An overview of the relevant American (US) and UK perspectives on female gang involvement is summarised and critiqued below.

1.3.1 Historical overview

It is important to firstly provide a historical overview of female gang research. Although there has been a necessary shift in understanding female gang involvement, traditional theories are still influential in today's understandings and gender biases are still apparent. Historically, the field of criminology has been male dominated, in both participants and researchers. The primary interest has been in understanding offending in young men (Millman & Kanter 1975), perhaps because men are regarded as more violent, and therefore more concerning. Empirical research and theoretical explanations often frame female gang involvement as a male phenomenon and females are often only considered in relation to male gang members (Campbell, 1990). Females have been either assumed to not be involved in gangs or to adopt either an auxiliary and stereotypical feminine role or by attempt to fit the traditional masculine role (Thrasher, 1927/1963). Thrasher (1927/1963) believes that social patterns of behaviours in females are contrary to gang activity. He perceives females as non-violent and therefore unlikely to engage in this type of activity and argues that females are generally more closely protected than males across social structures, which is consistent with power control theory of gender and crime (Hagan, Simpson & Gillis, 1987).

While Thrasher (1927/1963) argues that females are less likely to become involved in gangs, he acknowledges that a small proportion of females do. He regards females as less permanent members and categorises them as either sexual, promiscuous beings who have a specific, yet peripheral role ('sweethearts'), or tomboys who adopt masculine traits and have a similar role to male members ('gangsters'). He attributes the latter to 'tomboys' who feel uncomfortable with their gender and as a result abandon conventionally feminine traits in favour of being more masculine, thereby fulfilling a masculine role. By associating males with violence and females with sex and promiscuity, he suggests that the traditional role of a female is heavily linked to sexuality. Thrasher's (1927/1963) research is gender biased and heavily based on assumptions about females, which must be questioned. A substantial limitation of

his research is that his views of female gang involvement were produced from a male-centred perspective, which proceeded to govern the literature for decades.

Subsequent studies, which continue to favour a male-centred perspective of gangs and demonstrate a lack of interest or attention in females, include Spergel's (1964), Rice's (1963) and Hanson's (1964). The first of these describes gang-associated females as a threat to male members, due to the likelihood of them becoming pregnant with male gang members (Spergel, 1964), while the latter reinforce the portrayal of females as auxiliary and dependent on males (Rice, 1963; Hanson, 1964). Therefore, early accounts could be classed as sexist as they largely demonstrate gender biases and are quick to generalise women. A key limitation is that experiences of females are based on the perspectives of males. Therefore, one needs to consider the following questions: are there fewer gang-involved females, do females fulfil the roles described by early researchers, and does a different picture of female gang involvement arise when the views of female gang members are heard?

1.3.2 Feminist perspectives

1.3.2.1 *What is meant by gender?*

Gender relates to physical attributes such as chromosomes, genitalia and internal reproductive structures. However, gender is more complex than this as it is shaped by social and cultural norms and concepts of what it means to be male or female. Within society, differences between genders are encouraged from an early age, in terms of physical appearance, emotional expression and socialisation. Therefore, certain traits and behaviours are associated with being either male or female. As a result, a person's experiences and behaviours are often understood as either being congruent or incongruent with gender norms and expectations. For example, hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987) characterises males as powerful, authoritative and aggressive beings. Feminism derived from socio-political movements and ideologies which aim to achieve equal rights for females, thereby ending female's oppression. A feminist perspective questions binary discourses and considers the impact of language and discourse on shaping

or constraining a person's experiences, while taking into account the intersections of ethnicity, class, disability and sexuality (Hooks, 2000). Without questioning these binaries, we are suggesting that females are less powerful and are therefore at risk of being oppressive (Alloway, 1995). Previous researchers have often made sense of female's experiences of gang involvement from male perspectives and through the lense of societal expectations of gender roles. The current research comes from a feminist position as it seeks to understand experiences of females from a female perspective, within the context of societal expectations and power differences in gender. The research also aims to identify relevant and equal ways of supporting gang-involved developed from these understandings.

1.3.2.2 Limitations of male-centred research

Historically, gang activity has been associated with masculine traits and therefore framed as a male phenomenon. The role of females has been conceptualised as serving the interests of male gang members, as research based on gang-involved males' perspectives depict females as having secondary and peripheral roles. Furthermore, research has generally conceptualised gang involvement in marginalised groups of men to be an understandable response to adversity. However, this understanding is not broadened to females, despite them sharing the same social and cultural contexts as their male counterparts. Campbell (1990) points out that a male's perspective can minimise and distort the motivations and roles of gang-involved females as a result of gender biases. This has resulted in female involvement being neglected, sexualised, and simplified.

Batchelor (2009) refers to the dichotomous portrayal of gang-involved females, as either 'sexually liberated criminals' or 'sexually subjugated victims'. The former is deemed abnormal and concerning, whereas the latter fails to acknowledge a sense of agency and self-efficacy. This fits with depictions of females from early descriptions as auxiliary and peripheral in nature, with an emphasis on females' sexuality, while overlooking their participation in criminal activity (Thrasher, 1927/1963).

1.3.2.3 Moving towards a female-centered perspective

For decades, feminist scholars have critiqued traditional gang research for relying on an externally imposed male perspective in order to develop an understanding of females' experiences (Campbell, 1984, 1990). Leonard (1982) highlights the sexist nature of research, which focuses on the experiences, interests, and values of males. In the last thirty years, research within this area has become more aligned to a feminist approach, by exploring female gang involvement from a female perspective. Firmin (2010) points out that females' experiences are at risk of being oversimplified as research often fails to consider the complex nature of females' experiences in gang association and involvement. As a result, services will be insufficient in meeting their needs. A feminist perspective ensures that women's experiences are brought to the forefront, as opposed to being suppressed (Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988).

When it comes to serious criminal activity, few would dispute that more males are directly involved in gang activity compared to their female counterparts (e.g. Fagan, 1990). However, recent evidence indicates that females are more involved in gangs than was previously assumed. Although female perspectives are being increasingly heard, this is arguably related to their involvement in criminal activity. This motivation is problematic and to work effectively with females at-risk of or currently involved in gangs, the understanding must go beyond the crime.

1.3.2.4 Female-centered studies in America

Feminist researchers in America have moved beyond stereotypical notions of females as secondary to males, to more accurate insights into the lives of these young women (Campbell, 1984, 1990; Chesney-Lind, 1993; Chesney-Lind & Hagedorn, 1999; Harris, 1988; Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995; Laidler & Hunt, 1997; Miller, 2001, 2008; Miller & Decker, 2001; Moore, 1991; Quicker, 1983). These ethnographies offer a more "nuanced portrayal of the complex gender experiences of girls in gangs" (Miller, 2001, p16), firstly by considering experiences of females from a female perspective and secondly by acknowledging the multifaceted nature of females' experiences in gangs. This research demonstrates that there is not one type of female gang member; while some may fit traditional stereotypes, others do

not. Harris (1988), who carried out structured interviews with 21 gang-involved Latina females aged between 13 and 18 years in California, found that female gang members fitted a 'macho' image, as opposed to the traditional 'wife and mother' role of Latina women, with similar patterns observed by Moore (1991). They described managing their own circles and achieved status from their own behaviour, as opposed to being reliant on males. Similarly, Quicker (1983) who carried out interviews with gang-involved females in Los Angeles, states that females are rarely coerced into becoming part of a gang and instead willingly request membership. The females in his study spoke about three basic criteria for membership approval: firstly, the purpose of joining should not be for protection only; secondly, there must be indication that the female can and will support the gang in challenging situations as opposed to folding under pressure; thirdly, she must be able to fight and defend herself. These accounts offer a different perspective from the stereotypes that have developed from male perspectives by demonstrating that females are not restricted in their role within a gang and in some circumstances this involves participating in violent crime.

Campbell (1984, 1990) presents a series of social biographies, of three women who were members of various New York gangs in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Two females were affiliated with male gangs and one was previously part of an all-female gang but had moved into a mixed gender gang. Campbell described a hegemonic gender hierarchy within the mixed gender gangs. She offers two conclusions from her research. Firstly, that male gangs provide an opportunity for females to become affiliated with gang-related activity. Secondly, that once involved, solidarity between females develops (i.e. 'sisterhood') and a female's status in the gang is influenced equally or more so by female peers, compared to male peers. Status did not appear to be dependent on sexuality or relationships with males. Campbell moved beyond previous research by offering a female perspective, with an explicit feminist orientation, and more researchers have since been compelled to further address this gap.

1.3.2.5 Female roles within gangs; moving beyond stereotypes

Laider and Hunt (1997) question the current portrayals of gang-involved females as “wild, hedonistic, irrational, amoral and violent” (Chesney-Lind, 1993 p 324) and more concerning than their male equivalents due to not adhering to gender roles. They consider whether the experiences of gang-involved females differ across types of gangs. They distinguish between ‘auxiliary’ and ‘independent’ female gangs. The former is the more common type and is based on connection to male counterparts, whereby the females are distinct but auxiliary to the men (Harris, 1988; Quicker, 1983; Moore, 1991). These are reflective of the gender roles and expectations that exist within society (Messerschmidt, 1995). Females in this type of group describe how males hold more power in making decisions and will attempt to control them at times when their gender role expectations are challenged (Campbell, 1984; Harris, 1988). The second type of female gang, which is less common, is one that is independent, with its own rules. Laider and Hunt (1997) carried out interviews with 65 self-identified female gang members in San Francisco. They divided respondents into seven gangs; six were connected with male gangs and classed as auxiliary, whereas one was an independent all female gang. The researchers found that across all gangs, females experienced violent situations, including violence in their intimate relationships and described how their boyfriends made efforts to make sure they behaved in ways that were in accordance with a traditional female role. They noted that females in the auxiliary gangs reported experiencing more violent situations than those in the independent gang and appeared to be at greater risk of being harmed across more settings. Those in the auxiliary gang spoke about experiencing violent and threatening relationships within their gangs, whereas those in the independent gang described having stable and dependable relationships with their gang ‘sisters’ and felt safe among this group. The researchers conclude that male gang members play a divisive role in the females’ relationships with one another.

Miller and Decker (2001) explored the gendered nature of gang activity through exploratory interviews with 27 females aged 12-20 years in St Louis gangs. The researchers found that although females reported considerable involvement in gang activity, they did not report extensive involvement in those offences deemed

'most serious' (e.g. use of weapons during confrontations). Furthermore, the females described using their gender to shape their involvement by avoiding more serious crimes, which suggests a protective function of being female within a gang. Their analysis of homicide data elaborated on these findings, as females were less often victims of gang homicide. These differences are coherent with social constructions of gender, as common societal scripts imply that violent perpetrator behaviour is more normative between males, which can result in gang homicide victimisation.

The above research highlights females' differing experiences of being part of a gang, and emphasises both positive and negative aspects. Some females have been found to adhere to traditional gender expectations and experience heightened physical and sexual victimisation. For others, being part of a gang can offer the means to resist dominant gender stereotypes, while providing refuge from hostile family units, resulting in a sense of belonging and empowerment (Campbell, 1990; Moore, 1991; Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995; Laidler & Hunt, 2001; Miller, 2001; 2008). A common theme within research is the strong emphasis on group loyalty within gangs (Quicker, 1983; Thrasher, 1927; Cloward & Ohlin, 2013). In Quicker's (1983) interviews with gang-involved females, a comparison to a family unit is made. The young women discuss making sacrifices and looking out for each other, always siding with their group when challenged by an outside group.

1.3.2.6 Limitations of USA Studies within the UK

Relying on the USA evidence base is problematic because of the differences between the organisation of gangs in the USA and the UK (Firmin, 2010).

Campbell (1984; 1990), amongst other American researchers, focused her research on females who had an active role in gang involvement and often these young women were members of female gangs that existed alongside their male equivalent. Gangs within the UK have not been found to have such a uniformed structure, and there is a lack of evidence for female gangs branching off separately from male gangs (Firmin, 2010).

1.3.2.7 Female-centred studies in the UK

In the UK, gang research, irrespective of gender, is less well developed. Although this has expanded in recent years (Aldridge & Medina, 2008; Bradshaw, 2005; Kintrea, Bannister, Pickering et al, 2008; Pitts, 2007; Sharp, Aldridge & Medina 2006; Young et al., 2007), gangs continue to be portrayed as a male phenomenon with a lack of reference to females. There persists to be a lack of attention dedicated to the opinions and experiences of females (Esbensen, Deschenes & Winfree, 1999). Recent examples of UK based studies that fit this disposition are Aldridge and Medina's (2008) research on gang-involved young people, Pitt's (2007) study of armed gangs and Kintrea and colleagues (2008) who explored territoriality in young people across the UK. In their articles, these researchers pay little attention to females' experiences, with the main reason provided being that females play a secondary role to males in gangs. In fitting with USA research, Kintrea and colleagues (2008) and Pitts (2007) base their understandings of female experiences on the views of male gang members and practitioners, which further perpetuate existing stereotypes. The only UK gang research to directly explore the views and experiences of females are; Young and colleagues (2007), XLP (2013) and Firmin (2010), which were all developed from a service perspective.

Young and colleagues (2007) published a report for the Youth Justice Board that aimed to address group offending in adolescence. They carried out interviews with young people who were 'known to offended with other people', including 25 young women aged 14-20 years who were known to the Youth Offending Teams. Results found that the females usually lived in communities with high rates of violence and spoke about feeling safer in the presence of others than alone. They also experienced difficulties at home including violence, loss, rejection, abuse and exploitation. Participants spoke about gang involvement emerging from positive friendships, which had developed in school, within the care system, or on the estates where they were living, and relationships tended to be based on friendships rather than intimacy. This fits with findings that peer relationships are a key social activity for young people in general, and females in particular (Burman, Brown & Batchelor, 2003). For young women who face disruption, abuse and

neglect within their family life context, a peer group can offer a means to explore one's identity, while gaining approval from others and a sense of protection (Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995; Miller, 2001). Some of the young women were in relationships with men in the group and the nature of these differed; some were abusive, but most were not. Females also spoke about experiencing a sense of 'thrill' when participating in gang related activity, which is overlooked when viewing females as 'sexually subjugated victims'. These findings reinforce the need for researchers to engage with females directly, as a different understanding of gang involvement emerges.

In recent years, there has been criticism about the lack of attention paid to females in government policies and responses to youth violence. As a result, two important studies have been conducted. The Centre for Social Justice, which aims to place social justice at the centre of British politics, collaborated with XLP, an urban youth charity in London that aims to create positive futures for young people. They published a paper in 2013 that highlights the predicament of females associated with gangs following recognition that this group can be relegated in discussions about these issues. Their aim was to shed further light on this imperative topic and to assist policy makers in their understanding of the multitude of challenges that these young women face. They spoke to "many girls and young women who are or have been gang associated" (XLP, 2013 p6) and over 30 organisations working to tackle gang issues. These accounts provide an insight into the negative experiences and impacts of gang-involvement for females, for example; withdrawing from education; breakdown of family, peer and community relationships; sexual exploitation; involvement in criminality. This report emphasises the mismatch between people's experiences and understandings of these, particularly for policy makers. The authors highlight a need for wider changes by: preventing young women from becoming involved in gangs, minimising the risks for those who are gang-involved, and offering effective support in helping females exit gangs. For this to be done there needs to be: effective mapping of the problem; identification of windows of opportunities to access young women; provision of effective mentoring; appropriate police responses; support for gang-affected schools.

'The Female Voice in Violence' project by Race on the Agenda (ROTA) aims to assess the impact of serious youth violence on females. Firmin (2010) published research in association with ROTA, which aimed to understand the role of females associated with gang-related offences. They carried out interviews and focus groups with 352 females from across London. Participants were either gang affiliated, relatives or friends of gang members, and/or directly involved in gang activity. Firmin (2010) explored the role of females, attractions of violence, association with violence, experiences of relatives' involvement, perceptions of a healthy relationship, and the female's role in offending. Those that were gang involved described their roles as; holding money, weapons and drugs, organising attacks, recruiting other females and supplying alibis. She found that gang associated females were at risk of physical abuse, sexual violence, and offending behaviour. Through exploration of experiences of service provision, she found that females had often been passed through care systems, which appeared to be designed for males. For example, they reflected on being unable to find a space that felt safe to talk about their concerns, within pupil referral units. This again highlights the impact of wider level issues.

1.4 Consideration of The Wider Context

1.4.1. Contextual theories

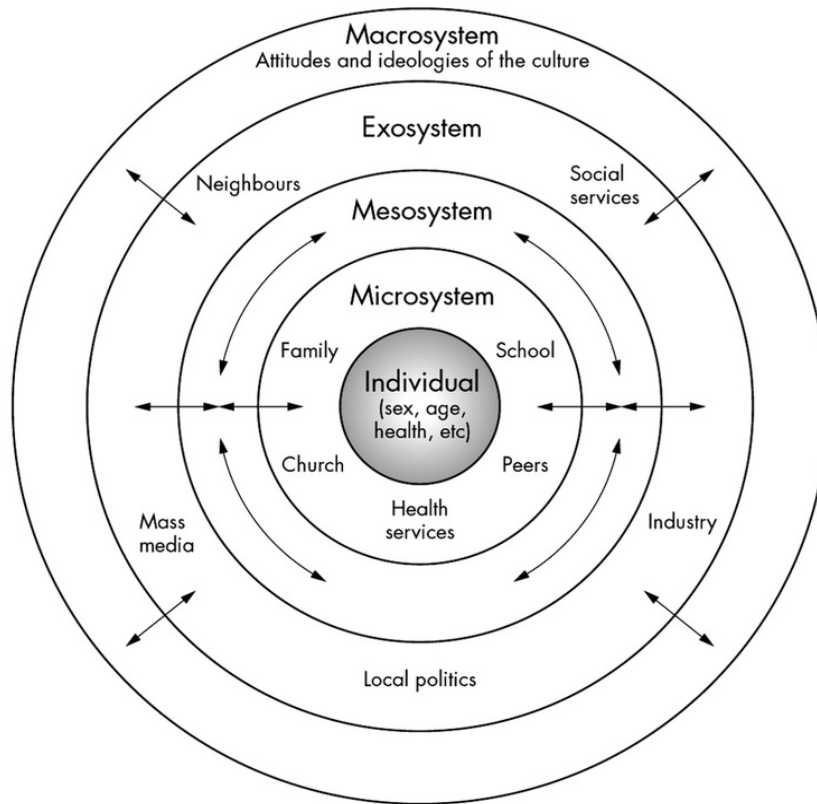
The British Criminal Justice System and discourses within society frame crime as a choice, which implies free will and individual responsibility, providing justification for punishment. A social constructionist perspective goes beyond the individual by considering the influence of social, cultural and political contexts on a person's experiences and subsequent behaviour. This perspective believes that in order to create an effective solution, we must first develop an understanding of how a problem is constructed. Deconstructing the wider systemic issues of oppression that perpetuate and maintain female gang involvement can inform prevention and intervention, while challenging systemic factors that perpetuate violence.

A number of psychological theories recognise that it is crucial to take into account how people experience the world within their context including Social Control Theory (Hirschi, 1969), Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model (1992), and Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM; Pearce & Cronen 1980). The dominant biopsychosocial model (Engel, 1979) takes into account biological (e.g. genetic make up), psychological (e.g. ways of thinking) and social factors (e.g. economic marginalisation) factors. While this model acknowledges some of the wider social factors related to female involvement, it still conceptualises these females as troubled, with a lack of love and supervision at home, thereby further strengthening stereotypes of females involved in gangs and reinforcing the idea of these females being 'abnormal'. Furthermore, this perspective places blame on the family, rather than considering the wider context.

Social Control Theory (Hirschi, 1969) recognises the psychological function that a gang can serve. This theory explains that social disorganisation at home and in the community, and complex interpersonal relationships, can lead a person to become involved in a gang, as this can provide a sense of belonging. Group solidarity is understandable in neighbourhoods that are marginalised and chaotic. A lack of resources and boredom can encourage individuals to unite with others in similar circumstances, and as a result, the group can offer a social outlet. Furthermore, financial pressures that often exist for those living in marginalised communities are likely to cause stress, tension, and even violence in the home (Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995). Parents living within these contexts may not have the resources to monitor their children and/or be less present due to additional pressures (Thornberry, 2003).

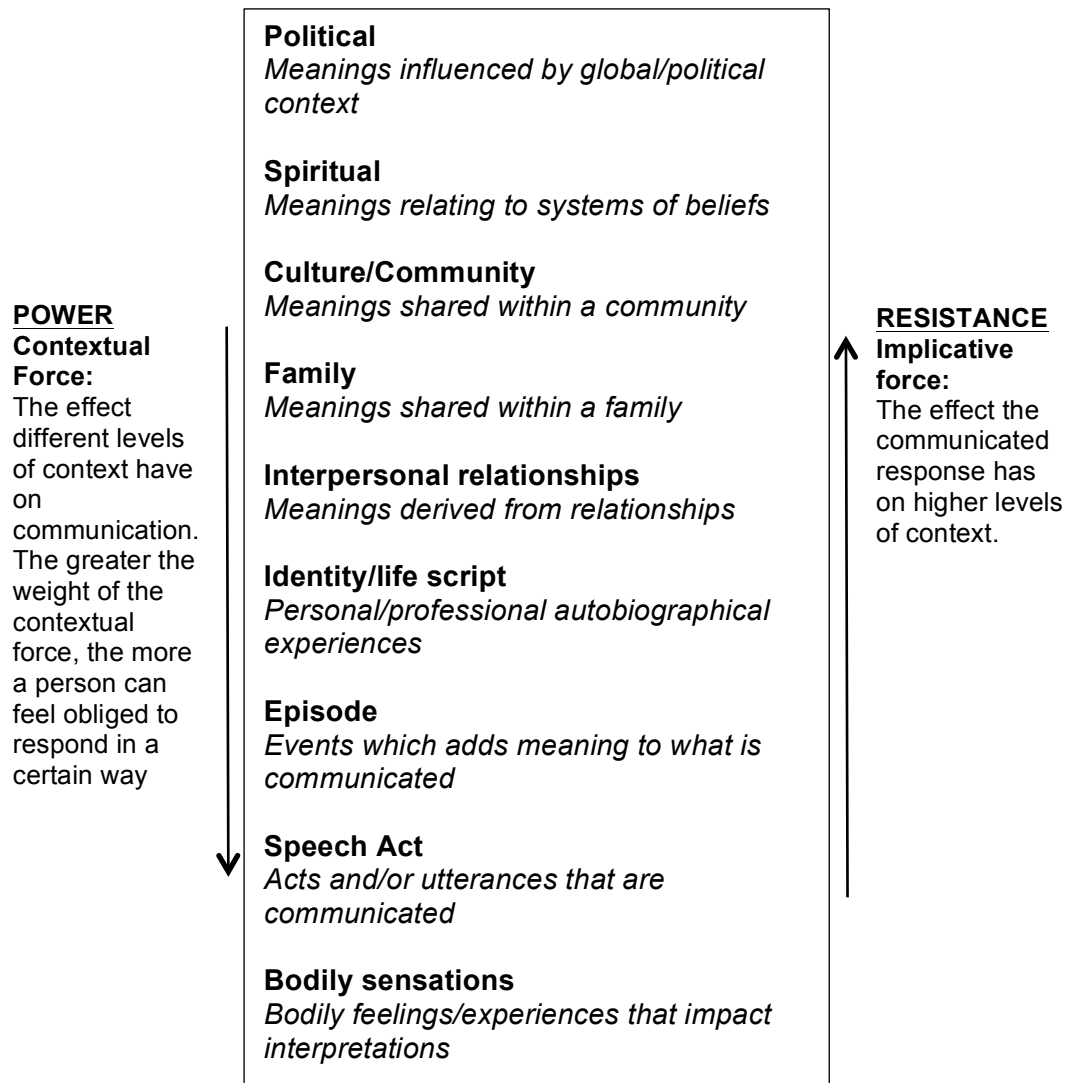
Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model (1992; figure 1) proposes that a person's experiences are moulded by the different systems within their environment, including parent and peer relationships (microsystem), wider factors such as social, political and economic structures (exosystem), and societal attitudes and culture (macrosystem). A holistic approach, which takes into account micro and macro levels of understanding, offers a more comprehensive explanation of female gang involvement.

Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model



CMM (Pearce & Cronen, 1980; see figure 2) considers the impact of multiple levels of context on a person's experiences and actions. This theory illustrates the ways in which some stories have a stronger force in shaping a person's actions than others and how changes in one level of context can have an effect on others. It specifically considers how wider social forces shape individual experiences and perceptions. Resistance represents a person's response to higher contexts, which can either liberate or enslave a person (Pearce & Cronen, 1980).

Figure 2: Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM; Pearce & Cronen, 1980)



These contextual theories fit with David Smail's (1993) social materialist approach to clinical psychology, which refers to the 'impress of power' and recognises the impact of wider societal structures on a person's experiences, while emphasising the role of power and resources. He encourages 'outsight', rather than insight, whereby external factors, which may be impressing down on a person, are identified when seeking to understand a person's experience or behaviour. Hagan and Smail (1997) introduced 'power mapping', which identifies 'distal' and 'proximal' factors in a person's life. Distal factors refer to macro-level systems that impact on a person's well-being, whereas proximal factors are more immediate,

but less powerful. They question the ethical nature of purely focusing on a person's proximal factors when understanding and working with their distress, as this implies individual responsibility and suggests that the person must change without offering them the means to bring about the change.

1.4.2 Contextual research

Within the last two decades, research within this field has moved towards understanding a person's experiences within their context and recognises the adversities that many gang-involved young people face.

American research demonstrates that females in USA gangs tend to face disproportionate levels of adversity prior to gang involvement as compared to females who are not involved in gangs. These experiences include histories of abuse and trauma, family conflict, low parental monitoring, living in financially deprived communities and exclusion from school (Campbell, 1984, 1990; De La Rue & Espelage, 2014; Miller, 2001; Voisin, King, Diclemente & Carry, 2014). Research also suggests that gang involved females experience a desire for safety, belongingness, and social support (Harris, 1988) and joining a gang can be a means of protecting oneself from violence (Lauderback, Hansen & Waldorf, 1992). However, in reality gang members are at increased risk of victimisation from other gangs and from their own members, for example violent initiation rituals or punishment for breaking rules (e.g. Padilla, 1992). Melde, Taylor and Esbensen (2009) explored whether perceived protection outweighs actual rates of victimisation. They found that male and female gang members reported high levels of victimisation but low levels of fear. The researchers conclude that gang membership may be protective from an *emotive* point of view, i.e. feeling protected by a system. Slovic's (1987) paradigm explains that when risks are known, viewed as controllable and do not produce high levels of fear, the risks will be viewed as acceptable. In addition, there may also be a level of 'fearlessness', which warrants respect within gangs.

Within the UK, Young and colleagues (2007) found that experiences of family conflict, loss/bereavement, bullying, neglect, being part of the care system, and exclusion from mainstream education were common themes. This suggests that females may join gangs to escape traumatic experiences and adverse environments. The researchers acknowledge that for these young women, it may not be feasible to participate in 'bedroom cultures', which are home-based social activities that are said to be more typical for females (for example experimenting with clothes and hairstyles with friends) compared to those who live in safer environments (McRobbie & Garber, 1976). Furthermore, where leisure facilities are limited and/or unaffordable, taking to the streets as a means of leisure may be one of the few options (Skelton, 2000). This can be explained by Social Control Theory (Hirschi, 1969).

Although the above findings identify 'risk factors' of joining a gang, they go beyond individual and pathological accounts, by demonstrating that young people who become involved in gangs often live in areas of financial deprivation, and are forced to grapple with poverty and economic marginalisation within a society that privileges material success (Kruttschnitt, 2001). It has been argued that gang involvement can be an adaptive strategy for those attempting to cope with extreme social and economic deprivation (Baskin & Sommers, 1998). Within such communities violence is a common response to the oppressive contexts that allow for experiences of inequality, isolation and marginalisation (Simpson, 1991). Gang membership may result in social benefits such as physical protection in unsafe environments (e.g. estates where crime is high) and the opportunity to earn money through drug sales at a time when unemployment rates are surging (Howell & Egley, 2005). Gang involvement may be functional in environments where family and community resources are limited.

When considering marginality within society, age should be taken into consideration, due to the challenges that youths face within today's society and in particular those who face an intersection of inequalities across gender, race, class and ethnicity and therefore experience subjugation based on various aspects of the self. Adolescence is a western construction and is viewed as a critical turning

point within the lifespan. A number of psychological theories offer various tasks of adolescence. Havinghurst (1953) emphasises a developmental task focus for adolescents including skills, knowledge, functions and attitudes an individual is expected to acquire. Others have conceptualised identity formation and a sense of selfhood as a primary task; particularly Erikson (1968). Both emphasise self-agency and the building of resilience, however, the focus is primarily on the individual, while overlooking the wider context and cultural understandings of adolescence. Carter and McGoldrick's family life cycle (1988) goes beyond the individual by arguing that the tasks are undertaken and shared by the systems around the adolescent as well as the individually, while also recognising that tasks of adolescence are culturally determined.

Furthermore, experiences within adolescence are often gendered; for example, females often find themselves in a paradoxical position of achieving status from peers through their association with males, while experiencing denigration for their sexual activity (Eder, 1995; Lees, 1993; Thorne, 1993). Adolescents currently face a number of challenges which may include education pressures, reduced opportunities for jobs and experiences of social inequalities and gang involvement may offer a means to navigate them for some young women.

1.4.3 Liberation perspective versus social injury perspective

There is a debate within the literature as to whether or not gang involvement can be a liberating experience, particularly given that there has been a shift in the perceived role of females. Two opposing hypotheses have emerged from the literature; the 'liberation hypothesis' (Chesney-Lind, 1993) and the 'social injury hypothesis' (Curry, 1998).

1.4.3.1 *The liberation hypothesis*

The 'liberation hypothesis' has been used to explain female involvement in criminal activity for over forty years, as it was claimed that growing crime rates in females in the mid 1970's were linked to the women's liberation movement (Campbell, 1991). This perspective implies that the development of female gender

roles has resulted in an increase in gang-involved females, as they are now more likely to become involved in activities that were traditionally viewed as masculine, including criminal activity and violence. Those in support of the liberation hypothesis acknowledge the advantages of gang involvement for females; for example, protection from abusive and violent families/communities, (Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995; Lauderback et al 1992), a sense of belonging and empowerment (Campbell, 1990; Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995; Laidler & Hunt, 2001; Miller, 2001; 2008; Moore, 1991), excitement and fun (e.g. Young et al 2007), and support for rebellion against oppressive contexts (Harris, 1988). Campbell (1991) and Miller (2001) both observed that independence and autonomy can be achieved through resistance to paternalistic structures and exploitation and control by male gang members. This sense of resistance is required for the liberation hypothesis to be met.

1.4.3.2 The social injury hypothesis

The 'social injury hypothesis', on the other hand, acknowledges the serious detriment that gang involvement can have for females, with emphasises on experiences of victimisation. It posits that liberation is outweighed by the social costs of gang involvement, while acknowledging that acting to resist oppression can inadvertently result in increased harm. An example of this is the widespread evidence of gang members being the primary targets of gang violence (Melde, Taylor & Esbensen, 2009; Padilla, 1992; Block & Block, 1993; Decker, 1996; Klein & Maxson, 1989; Sanders, 1993). Gang participation not only exposes young people to victimisation, but it has been found to do so in a gendered way. Miller (1998) found that although females can utilise their gender to avoid involvement in 'masculine' activities (e.g. fighting and committing serious crime), they are consequently viewed as less important members and face heightened risks of other means of victimisation, such as sexual exploitation and abuse. Moore (1991) conducted interviews with male and female gang members and found that although females had a degree of autonomy within their circles, there were significant social costs. She developed 'themes of attitudes' and found that male gang members demonstrated one or more of the three following attitudes (p. 54): 1) Females are not considered worthy of gang membership, 2) Males should

always be more dominant than females in gangs, 3) Females are sexual objects for males. The long-term negative impact was highlighted due to the stigma of gang involvement being especially detrimental to the reputations of these young women, and as a result, few managed to leave the gang. In her conclusions, Moore (1991) explicitly rejects the liberation hypothesis, by emphasising the significant social injury that females face as a result of gang involvement.

Within the UK, Weller (2010) carried out research that aimed to address gendered violence within gangs. She carried out interviews with policy makers and practitioners working with gang-involved females across twenty-four statutory and non-governmental organisations, exploring their views on the potential relationships between offending and sexual victimisation. Professionals reported that many of these females had been subjected to sexual violence and the nature of this varied; for example being filmed on mobile phones and the footage being shared without consent, being 'passed around' between males, sexual exploitation, and rape. Although it could be said that all young women are at risk of sexual violence (Cawson, Wattam, Brooker & Kelly, 2000; Kelly, Regan & Burton, 1991), this research identifies additional risks for females who are involved in gangs due to retaliation, coercion and exploitation. There are further risks for those who challenge the regime, for example those who end relationships with members of the group and those who 'snitch'¹. Sexual violence and humiliation can be a form of punishment and control in such cases, whereas for men this may present in the form of physical violence. Within this study, practitioners described how young women are viewed as 'property' or 'objects' for male use. This is similar to Connell's (1987) description of gangs operating within a gendered regime, in which young women are often viewed as 'sexual objects' and are utilised to meet male demands. This article acknowledges the challenges associated with exiting or being excluded from a gang for females, such as being threatened and/or not being able to enter certain geographical areas. When there is a heightened risk associated with exiting, it will inevitably prevent some women from doing so. Quicker (1983) also found leaving a gang to be a risky and

¹ A person who tells on someone. A bum of a person, *urban dictionary*).

complex procedure and refers to active and passive departures; the former is when either a female chooses to remove herself from the gang or the gang force her to leave, whereas the latter is when either the female gradually stops spending time with the gang, or the gang dissolves. Active departures are associated with betrayal and therefore tend to be the most risky, with violence and injury being a common consequence.

1.4.3.3 A 'both and' perspective

There has been a debate between advocates of the 'liberation' and 'social injury' hypotheses, with arguments for both viewpoints. Miller (1996) adopts a 'both and' perspective by arguing that gang involvement can be liberating within certain contexts, but oppressive across others. She explains that females can achieve independence and autonomy through resistance to paternalistic and sexist structures, while recognising that sexist attitudes, violence and sexual exploitation in gangs often exists. Perhaps essential components of each hypothesis exist and both can be held to understand experiences of female gang involvement.

1.5 Current Responses to Gang Involvement Within the UK

1.5.1 Media discourses of gang-involved females

A social constructionist perspective acknowledges the power that is held within language and argues that through language and discourses, a person's experiences can be controlled, as oppression and power differences can be enabled. Therefore, it is important to consider the current dominant discourses within the media of gang-involved females.

Accounts of 'girl gangs' are increasingly present within in the UK media, and this is presented as a rising social problem. A social constructionist perspective takes into account the media's role in the construction of social realities. It has been argued that the media uses moral panic to define and distort problems and to gain social control and legitimate the use of punitive measures (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke & Robert, 2013; Garland, 2008). Young people living in today's

society are caught between a dichotomy of representations and discourses, as they are presented as symbols of hope for the future, while being disdained as a threat to social order (Giroux, 2012). In a report for the Home Office, Kinsella (2011) found that young people perceived themselves to be described negatively by the media and branded as troublemakers, with few positive representations. These dominant discourses produce what narrative therapy terms 'thin descriptions' (White & Epston, 1990), which define people in unhelpful ways. A thin description tends to develop from outsiders with more powerful voices, such as teachers, politicians and journalists. These descriptions restrict people from attributing meaning to their actions and from reflecting on the context in which their experiences and actions arise in (Morgan, 2000). Government interventions are framed by these contexts, as approaches are punitive as opposed to rehabilitative.

The media presents a further juxtaposition by separating female who are deemed as vulnerable and helpless from 'violent' females who are demonised as ruthless, hyper-violent and amoral transgressors who defy appropriate femininity. When women challenge the traditional stereotype and adopt a 'masculine' role, it is often portrayed as a problematic consequence of females pursuing equality with males (Batchelor, 2009; Irwin & Chesney-Lind, 2008). This relates to the 'sad, mad or bad' discourse that is often carelessly applied to gang-involved females; 'sad' reflects vulnerable victims, 'mad' refers to those who rebuke vulnerability and embody 'girl power', and 'bad' are those who are violent and amoral (Brown, 2011). Prentice (2000) refers to this as 'the dark side of girl power'. As young women are demonised by the media, they quickly become the problem and their own realities are obscured and ignored. An example of this is of the widely covered case of Samantha Joseph, who was labelled as the 'honeytrap killer', following her involvement in the death of a young man. Within media reports, her participation was more widely covered than her male co-defendants, which implied she was ultimately responsible. Furthermore, there was a considerable lack of critical reflection about what led to her involvement. In reality, boundaries are blurred between perpetrators and victims, and female offending commonly stems

from victimisation (e.g. De La Rue & Espelage, 2014; Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995; Lauderback et al 1992; Miller, 2001).

1.5.2 Service provision and government responses

A newspaper article '*The dark side of female empowerment: The rise of Britain's 'gangster girls' running gangs*' (Peacock, 2014) highlights that even though thousands of females are known to be involved in London gangs there is a lack of knowledge about their involvement. Local authorities fail to collect data on the numbers of gang involved females, despite statistics demonstrating that the narrowing gap in crime involvement between males and females, with females accounting for 1 in 6 arrests for violent attacks. This article questions the reasons for society's reluctance in addressing this issue and suggests it is because of society's gendered expectations of females, which do not fit with the image of a 'gangster'. An example from this article is the portrayal of the 2011 London riots, which were of 'angry men' despite females having a significant presence. This report argues that in order to try and understand and intervene with female gang involvement and gang culture in Britain, the media need to move passed out-dated gendered stereotypes.

Southgate (2011/12) carried out interviews with professionals to investigate how voluntary and community sectors understand female gang association and involvement, their ways of responding to meet the needs of females, and challenges they face in service provision. She highlights that services must be cautious about employing the term 'gang' as this may deter potential service users who do not define themselves in this way, and therefore suggests that services should articulate the needs of the females in ways that are more relevant to them. She also highlights a need for better multi-agency working across statutory and non-statutory sectors, common strategies and standards, training for professionals to assist them in identifying females in need of support, improved referral systems, and increased funding of services. Finally, she emphasises a need to consider females' positions within society, irrespective of whether they have been involved in gangs. She suggests that professionals need to support females to; "raise self-esteem, develop a clearer sense of identity, increase aspirations and

opportunities, develop a critical consciousness, an awareness of the consequences of their choices, and to be able to relate safely to others, particularly men” (p. 37).

While government responses to gang activity within the UK appear to be paying more attention to females than previously, female’s experiences continue to be largely overshadowed by males. For example, the ‘Ending Gang and Youth Violence’ report (HM Government, 2011) includes references to females but largely focuses on the experiences of males. Furthermore, in local services provisions have been highlighted, with a lack of appropriate support for females (Southgate, 2011/12).

1.6. The Current Research

The current research question is;

“How do females² make sense of their experiences of being involved in gang activity?”

The breadth of this question reflects the lack of current UK based research within this field. Given that female gang involvement has been largely under researched, it is important to contribute to the understanding of the experiences of this otherwise marginalised group of people. This study will explore factors that influence young women to become involved in gangs, experiences of gang involvement and what helped participants transition out of a gang. The current research intends to offer a detailed insight into the experiences of gang-involved females, from a psychological perspective, and aims to yield practical solutions for supporting and working with females who have experiences of gang involvement.

² The word ‘females’ was intentionally used. While some gang research refers to ‘girls’, this appears to describe a younger, less experienced individual. Furthermore, male research tends to use the word ‘males’ as opposed to ‘boys’ and therefore it felt important to be consistent and equal.

2.0 METHOD

2.1 Chapter Overview

I will consider the epistemological stance in which the current research is grounded before providing a rationale for choosing a qualitative research paradigm. The theoretical underpinnings and characteristics of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) will be considered and the rationale for selecting an IPA methodology will be discussed. Following this, I will explore the ethical considerations of the research and how the main ethical issues have been addressed. Finally, this chapter will conclude with a detailed description of the research design and process.

2.2 Selecting a Methodology

2.2.1 Epistemology

Epistemology is a philosophy that is interested in the theory of knowledge and seeks to explain how we understand a concept (Willig, 2013). It is imperative for research to be embedded within a particular epistemology and philosophy from the outset as this determines the aims and the process of the research (Willig, 2013). A realist position asserts that a reality exists, which can be studied through the gathering of data (Harper, 2011). Involvement in gang activity and being part of a gang are genuine and embodied experiences and this research aims to understand experiences of gang involvement from a female perspective. Critical realism is similar to realism in that it concurs that actual experiences do exist (Fade, 2004). However, it differs in its understanding as it asserts that experiences can only be accessed to a certain degree, which fits with the stance of the current research (Harper, 2011). As outlined in chapter 1, a limitation of previous gang research is that it often decontextualises people's experiences and choices by focusing on the characteristics of the individual, while overlooking the social, economic and political factors. This type of stance aligns with a realist position. A more critical perspective considers the impact of the wider context on a person's experiences. While this research acknowledges that people face actual experiences of adversity (e.g.

poverty, physical abuse and exclusion from systems), it also asserts that language can construct a person's experiences, behaviours and understandings. Firstly, the current research takes into account the social construction of gender roles in terms of social and cultural norms, which influence understandings of female gang involvement. Within the analysis, there will be consideration of how this shapes gang-involved female's experiences and understandings of their gang involvement. A social constructionist perspective considers the impact of social processes and the current research recognises that a gang is a phenomena that has been assigned to a particular group of people by society. There will be consideration of the impact of the gang label on a person's experiences and behaviour. Furthermore, the current research takes into account the power and influence of the dominant stories that are told by female gang members and the impact this has. Therefore, the current research assumes a critical realist - social constructionist stance. This epistemological stance recognises that different realities exist, including the researchers' own reality. The researchers' own experiences will inevitably have a role in co-constructing a person's reality.

2.2.2 Rationale for use of qualitative methodology

Quantitative approaches tend to predict cause and effect type relationships and require the use of predetermined variables (Willig, 2013). Randomised-controlled trial studies, which are classed as the 'gold-standard' approach for quantitative research, offer an understanding of how a large sample of previously selected participants act in response to certain conditions or interventions, and can offer useful contributions to the evidence base. Yet, they are limited in that they fail to offer a thorough construction of individual human experience. A further limitation of quantitative research, and some psychological models, is that they often fail to take into account the complexity of human experience by accounting for the impact of social and contextual factors.

Qualitative research goes beyond quantitative research as it allows for a more detailed exploration of how people make sense of their experiences of the world and is therefore interested in the meaning making of individuals and the process of

doing so (Willig, 2013). This is in line with one of the primary roles of Clinical Psychologists; to develop sophisticated and detailed formulations of our clients' experiences. Qualitative research also offers a more in depth exploration of a person's experiences, which would not be possible with a quantitative approach. It could be argued that genuine experiences are unable to be fully accessed through conversation alone, however, qualitative methods permit exploration and can offer an understanding of a person's experiences from a certain philosophical position (e.g. critical realist) embedded within their social context.

2.2.3 Choosing a qualitative methodology

A range of qualitative methods exist and assume different epistemological assumptions about the world. Within research, the questions being asked should drive the type of methodology that is selected. Furthermore, the researcher's epistemological stance will also inevitably influence the approach that is taken. As a critical realist – social constructionist, I believe that Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is the most useful for answering the research question.

2.3 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

Different viable qualitative methodologies were considered, including Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and Discourse Analysis (Georgaca & Avdi, 2012). IPA was selected after considering the appropriateness of these different options in answering the research questions and aims. I believe that my aim of exploring female's experiences would be best met by a method that allows the researcher to utilise the phenomenological and interpretive components of IPA. The focus of interviews is to capture, in detail, an individual's lived experiences and to make meaning of that personal experience. This method allows for a detailed insight into how females make sense of their experiences of being involved in gang related activity and allows the researcher to draw on phenomenological and interpretative aspects of a person's experience, rather than generating a specific model or theory. IPA's flexible methodological

protocol allows the interviews and analysis to be moulded by what the participants choose to talk about and my continuous reflexivity. This is appropriate due to female gang involvement being an under-researched topic.

IPA is made up of three philosophical principles: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography.

2.3.1 Phenomenology

Phenomenology is an aspect of philosophy that is interested human experience (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). IPA aligns with phenomenology as it considers how people understand and make sense of their world around them (Langdrige, 2007). Phenomenologists argue that we must first consider the human experience of objects and subjects before we begin to consider the world in terms of objects and subjects (Willig, 2013). These concepts only exist as people experience them and are dependent on mental orientation, time context and location in a process known as 'intentionality' (Willig, 2013). Husserl (1927) explains that our experiences are based on our already established notions and presumptions of the world and that a phenomenological outlook involves taking a step back and embracing a reflective stance on our everyday experiences. IPA emphasises that researchers must reflect on their personal beliefs to prevent their own assumptions from biasing their findings (Heidegger, 1962). The researcher must therefore seek to bracket off their own assumptions where possible. We must also accept that when researching human experiences, findings are based on our own interpretations of people's meaning making (Heidegger, 1962).

2.3.2 Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics refers to interpretation, which Willig (2013) argues is crucial when understanding qualitative data. Within IPA the researcher has a central role in the interpretative or hermeneutic practice (Palmer, 1969). The researcher goes further than understanding the participants' experiences, through the development of an

interpretative meaning that provides new understandings and meanings of experiences.

Within IPA 'double hermeneutics' occurs; as the participant attempts to make sense of their experiences, the researcher endeavours to make sense of them doing so. This idea acknowledges that as with participants, the research has established beliefs, thoughts and ideas, which will inevitably impact on the analysis (Smith et al, 2009).

The hermeneutic cycle is a fundamental aspect of IPA. This refers to the "dynamic relationship between the part and the whole at a series of levels" (Smith et al 2009, p. 28), which the researcher needs to engage with. Smith (2009) explains that "to understand any given part, you look to the whole; to understand the whole, you look to the parts" (Smith et al 2009, p. 28). So, to understand a person's world, you must look to the context in which their experiences occur.

2.3.3 Idiography

Idiography relates to how individuals act within their lives (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006). IPA is robustly idiographic as it places emphasis on the individual. The analysis involves a detailed examination of one case until a conclusion has been achieved, before moving on to a detailed analysis of the next, and so on. Analysis occurs at a micro level when each case is individually examined in detail, before moving onto macro-level analysis, which involves examining convergence and divergence of themes at a group level.

2.3.4 Reflexivity

On going engagement in reflexivity is a crucial process within IPA (Smith et al 2009). Reflexivity is a process that encourages researchers to reflect on their role in the research process and the findings that are produced (Willig, 2013). The researcher's past experiences and presence will inevitably influence the research process (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Reflexivity goes beyond recognising personal

biases as it forces us to consider our own personal reactions to the research context (Willig, 2013).

Throughout the research process, I assumed a reflexive position by taking time to explicitly recognise and reflect on my own preconceptions and assumptions (see Appendix A). This is referred to as 'bracketing' in IPA.

2.3.3.1 A reflexive note

In my clinical work, I am motivated to work with marginalised groups of young people. I align myself with social constructionism and critical realism, and therefore understand people's experiences by taking into account the impact of the wider context, rather than holding an individualistic view. Although I predicted some challenges in accessing females with experiences of gang involvement, the lack of research, combined with the dominant blaming and individualistic discourses, inspired me to pursue this topic. It felt important to enable young women to speak about their experiences and to develop an understanding from their own perspectives. Throughout interviews I held a position of curiosity, by attempting to avoid imposing my own ideas or assumptions, which have developed from my own experiences as a white British 28-year old Trainee Clinical Psychologist.

2.4 Conducting Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

2.4.1 Participants

2.4.1.1 Sample size

With IPA, a detailed, nuanced analysis is only possible on a small sample (Smith and Osborn, 2003). Smith et al (2009) suggest that between 4 and 10 participants is a reasonable sample size for a professional doctorate study. In line with this, the aim of the current research was to recruit 4-10 females who self-defined as previously being involved in gang activity. Four young women were recruited from various non-statutory London based organisations. Table one provides a summary of the participants' demographics, using pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

Table 1: Participant demographics

Participant	Age	Ethnicity
Violet	18	Black British
Amber	17	Asian British
Natasha	21	Black British
Chloe	22	White British

2.4.1.2 Homogeneity

Participants had to be female, aged 16 or above, and self-defined as having experiences of gang involvement. I did not provide a definition of gang involvement but when potential participants were identified, I outlined the nature of the research in more detail, to ensure that the research was relevant to them. There were instances when practitioners identified females who they believed were appropriate but from our conversations, these young women did not identify themselves as 'gang involved' and were therefore not considered as appropriate for the current research.

2.5 Procedure

2.5.1 Recruitment strategy

During the early stage of developing this research, contact was made with a non-governmental organisation, which was specifically developed for young people who had been excluded from mainstream school and many of the young people were identified as gang affected, with the aim of setting up interviews with females who attended the service. I spent a day at the facility and attended a women's group. I had the opportunity to talk to service users and professionals about my research. A number of young women were identified as eligible and stated interest in being interviewed. However, during the recruitment phase, the organisation permanently closed. I was able to conduct one interview prior to the closure.

While I was hopeful that I would be able to interview young women through the identified organisation, the number of interviews had not been confirmed. Therefore, I also made contact with other relevant non-governmental organisations. These were identified using internet searches and consulting with relevant professionals. Each organisation was approached via phone and/or email. A brief synopsis of the research was provided, with the aim of setting up a meeting to discuss the research in more detail. This would involve setting up either a phone conversation or face-to-face meeting with practitioners to allow for more in depth conversations about the research. Practitioners were also provided with the information sheet and consent form (see Appendix B and C), in addition to posters (Appendix D). I encouraged practitioners to hang the posters at the facilities and to distribute them to young women that they identified as potential participants for this research.

2.5.2 Data collection

2.5.2.1 Interviews versus focus groups

I discussed both options of interviews and focus groups with my research supervisor and practitioners working with gang involved young people. It was decided that interviews were a more appropriate option for data collection for this research population for various reasons. We anticipated that participants might talk about sensitive experiences that they may want to keep private. There were also concerns around the safety of young people in focus groups; for example, participants may have been in rival gangs with each other and therefore it would not be appropriate for them to share their experiences in a group setting.

2.5.2.2 Developing the interview schedule

Interviews were exploratory in nature, as I held the stance that participants were the experts of their own experiences, therefore, effort was made to ensure that the interviews were lead by participants. An interview schedule was developed to use as a guide (see Appendix E). Each interview had a similar starting point, which involved asking the interviewee to explain how they first became involved in gang activity. The interview schedule was co-developed with my research supervisor.

2.5.2.3 Interview procedure

As I entered the recruitment phase, setting up interviews proved to be challenging and I recognised that I needed to be flexible in my approach. Some interviews occurred on the day of the initial meetings and others took more time to set up. On several occasions, interviews that had been arranged did not occur due to participants not turning up. In these instances I attempted to make contact with participants to rearrange the interviews, however, I was sometimes unable to make contact and interviews were not always re-arranged. The ethical issues of this process will be discussed in section 2.6.

A 'snowballing' technique used for recruitment, whereby I asked participants to identify friends who fulfilled the inclusion criteria, who they thought would be interested in participating. In these instances, I asked them to provide them with the research poster and my contact details.

Prior to the interviews taking place, I informed potential participants about the details of the study. If the person was interested in being interviewed and met the eligibility criteria, an interview was arranged. Consent forms were signed and confidentiality was explained. Effort was made to ensure the participant felt comfortable during the interview process (see section 2.6). The interviews took place at either the organisations' facilities or a location that was more convenient for the interviewee. They lasted between 50 minutes and 1 hour 15 minutes. During the interviews, I drew upon my skills as a Trainee Clinical Psychologist, building rapport with participants at the start of each interview. I emphasised that they did not have to answer questions that they did not want to, nor did they have to share experiences that they felt uncomfortable talking about. I explained that my intention was to hear about their experiences and that there were no correct or incorrect responses. I checked in with the participant prior to starting the interview by asking if they felt comfortable to begin. The interviews were driven by what the participants chose to talk about, with some guidance from the interview schedule (Appendix E). A digital voice recorder was used to record the interviews. Once the interview was completed, an informal debrief occurred. I provided a £20 voucher as a gesture of appreciation for their participation.

2.5.2.4 Reflexive diary

After each interview, I allocated time to reflect on the process. I recorded any thoughts, and feelings that came to mind during and after the interview (see Appendix A). This process assisted with 'bracketing' in the analysis (Husserl, 1927), as I was able to identify and recognise my own assumptions and to reflect on emotions that were evoked in the interview process (Spinelli, 2005). Having a record of my reflections was useful during the analysis as they provided reference for verbal and non-verbal cues, content, interactions and the level of rapport with each participant.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

2.6.1 Informed consent

Prior to interviews commencing, potential participants were given the information sheet and consent form (see Appendix B and C). Time was taken to allow participants to read through the form and afterwards they were encouraged to ask any questions. It was clearly explained to participants, verbally and in writing, that they had the right to withdraw, break, or reschedule at any point. They were encouraged to only disclose what they felt comfortable sharing and they were informed that they could withdraw from the study before, during or after the interview.

2.6.2 Confidentiality

Participant information and content of interviews have been kept confidential. The purpose of the interviews and the boundaries of confidentiality were outlined clearly prior to the interview being conducted. It was explained that confidentiality would be breached in supervision if there was genuine concern regarding the safety of the interviewee or another and that effort would be made to discuss this with the interviewee prior to breaching confidentiality. This issue did not arise in any of the interviews.

Personal identifiable information has been anonymised in transcripts, thesis extracts and any resulting publications, to protect confidentiality. Individuals were told that the findings of the research may be shared with the providing organisations. There is a possibility that responses may be identifiable by professionals and service-users from within the organisation. Efforts were made to avoid this through carefully selecting non-identifiable quotes.

2.6.3 Storage of data

The information sheet outlined how the data would be stored and when it would be destroyed. To ensure anonymity of their identity, pseudonyms were allocated to participants, both during the research process and in the write up. Consent forms and transcripts were stored in a locked environment and only I am be aware of the identity of participants, in line with the 1998 Data Protection Act.

2.6.4 Ethical considerations for interviewees

Potential risks were considered before the interview stage of this research commenced. Due to the nature of the research, it was anticipated that some participants would relay distressing accounts during the interviews. In these instances, the young person was supported and directed to speak to their key worker (or equivalent). Participants had the opportunity to stop or withdraw from the study at any point.

The likelihood of criminal activity being reported also needed to be considered. The research is positive in its focus, therefore questions were not directed at the nature of criminal activity. The sample included young people with past experiences of gang involvement, which meant that disclosure of current risk was unlikely. Furthermore, the organisations that the young women attended carried out risk assessments. Interviewees were told verbally and in writing that if the involvement in criminal activity was on-going or in the past and the interviewee or another individual was believed to be at significant risk or harm, this would need to be reported to the research supervisor in the first instance. Anonymity was not

guaranteed and this was clearly outlined to the participants prior to interviews being carried out. The focus of the interviews was not on the nature of the criminal activity that the young person may have been involved in and this was emphasised prior to the interview commencing.

An additional ethical concern related to the challenges of securing participants. Gang involved females could be classed as a 'hard to reach' group for various reasons. Individuals may want to protect their safety (i.e. avoidance of 'snitching') and/or they may not feel comfortable talking about gang related experiences. Furthermore, some potential participants may not consider themselves to be appropriate for the research due to the lack of clarity in the definition of a gang. In terms of ethical concerns, the recruitment process often involved chasing people up with phone calls. I was aware that I needed to recognise times when people did not want to speak and I made a conscious effort not to be too invasive.

A final ethical concern that I considered is that researching gang-involved individuals may further marginalise this group, due to assumptions that these individuals are different from the rest of society. However, this research intends to enable female voices to be heard, while offering a critical perspective of the current negative and stigmatised views of gangs, thus offering an alternative discourse.

I was able to seek out regular supervision from my thesis supervisor to discuss any ethical concerns.

2.6.5 Ethical approval

Ethical approval was sought and granted from the School of Psychology Research Ethics Sub-Committee (see Appendix F & G).

2.7 Analysis

There is not a universal method of IPA. For the purpose of this study I drew upon the guidelines provided by Smith et al (2009). The common IPA practices outlined in section 2.7.2 were adhered to.

2.7.1 Transcription

The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. IPA entails transcribing the entire content of the interview, using the interviewee and interviewer's exact words (Smith et al 2009). Transcription must also be consistent. Although it is optional to denote more minute features such as emotions and length of pauses, these must be recorded in a consistent manner.

2.7.2 Analytic process

2.7.2.1 Stages 1 and 2: Reading and re-reading of the transcripts

To familiarise myself with the data I initially listened to the interview recording, followed by reading and re-reading of the transcript. At this stage I was focused on becoming immersed in the content of the interview. Interpretation had not yet begun. Smith et al (2009) points out that the researcher should be careful to slow down this step rather than rushing through to step two. Therefore I made a conscious effort to gradually and thoroughly read and re-read each transcript.

2.7.2.2 Stage 2: Initial noting

During this process exploratory notes were made on content, language and interpretations. I recorded recollections from the interviews and any thoughts and feelings that came to mind when reading the transcripts, using my reflexive diary as a prompt (Appendix A). Here I was attempting to 'bracket off' my own preconceptions and remain engaged in the data itself. These notes were made on the left hand margin of the page.

2.7.2.3 Stage 3: Developing emergent themes

On the right hand margin of the page I began to develop emergent themes, primarily from the exploratory comments made in step two (see Appendix H). This is a complex process as it requires the researcher to condense the data while preserving the complexity.

2.7.2.4 Stage 4: Searching for connections amongst emergent themes in each individual case and building superordinate themes

The next step involved connecting emergent themes, which were identified through abstraction and subsumption. Abstraction involved clustering similar themes together and from here, developing an overriding theme, which is referred to as a super-ordinate theme in IPA. Subsumption involved grouping other similar themes under the super-ordinate theme. Themes that were thought to encapsulate wider themes were raised and given the super-ordinate status. Themes were continually revised and this procedure was repeated for each transcript (see Appendix I).

2.7.2.5 Stage 5: Searching for patterns across cases

Once the analysis of the transcripts had been completed, the entire data was considered collectively, by searching for patterns in themes across interviews. Each theme was written onto a separate index card, after which similarities, overlaps and connections between themes were considered. The cards were organised into piles according to themes. These were revised and reorganised until the superordinate and subordinate themes were identified (see Appendix J). Superordinate themes attempt to capture the subordinate themes, which are clustered under the superordinate themes accordingly.

2.7.3 Use of supervision

Academic and peer supervision provided a means to audit the stages of analysis as part of a quality control process (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). My supervisor read and themed one of my transcripts, which allowed me to ensure that I was approaching the analysis appropriately, and to ensure that my approach fitted with IPA. I also met regularly with a colleague, who was also using IPA. During this time

we shared extracts of our transcripts with each other and discussed potential codes and themes.

3.0 RESULTS

3.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter will firstly present an overview of the super-ordinate and sub-ordinate themes. I will go on to describe and discuss in detail each of the themes. Quotes and interpretations are included, in line with IPA.

3.2 Overview of Themes

Analysis of the interviews led to the development of four super-ordinate themes, which are outlined in Table 2.

The themes presented are not discrete, as overlaps exist between them. All of the super-ordinate themes will be considered and relevant quotations from the interviews will be provided as evidence for each theme.

Table 2: Superordinate and Subordinate Themes

SUPERORDINATE THEMES	SUBORDINATE THEMES
Getting involved; 'The Circle of Life' ³ Survival	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Growing up around gangs</i> • <i>Transition to becoming involved</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Physical & emotional protection</i> • <i>Financial security</i> • <i>Escapism through drugs and alcohol</i>
Being Involved – 'A Double-Edged Sword'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Peer relationships</i> • <i>'Ride or die'</i> • <i>Gender and power</i>
Getting Out & Staying Out	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Wanting a better life for yourself (and others)</i> • <i>Difficulty moving on</i>

3.3 Getting involved; 'The Circle of Life'.

When reflecting on the process of becoming involved in a gang, Violet explained;

"It's just the circle of life 'init'" (Violet, 1222-1223)

This metaphor highlights the fundamental impact of a person's environment on becoming involved in gang involvement, as it suggests that gang involvement is largely dependent on a person's social context in terms of growing up around gangs, and becoming involved being described as an inevitable and natural process. The 'circle of life' will be explored further within this section.

³ The themes in quotations represent the language used by participants

3.3.1 Growing up around gangs

All of the young women described gang involvement as stemming from living in gang-affected areas. Violet reflected on being around gangs her whole life. There was a sense that gangs were everywhere and therefore, familiar to her.

I've been around it my whole life, I came from [AREA] 'init. So to be honest it's not like it was something that was new to me... (Violet, 45-48)

Similarly, Amber implied that gangs are fundamental and well established in the estate that she lived, and therefore difficult to avoid.

...a council estate where gangs are at the root of things so it's a bit hard to avoid (Amber, 731-733)

All of the young women had grown up around gangs and involvement was a common path amongst their peers. Natasha reflected on how it "just happened", rather than her consciously deciding to become a gang member. She indicated that relationships within the community led to the formation of a gang, which seems similar to the formation of other types of groups, stemming from shared experiences and relating to each other. She also described how the extent of involvement progresses.

It's so weird, I didn't sign consent forms and kill someone to get involved...it just happened because I lived in that area and everyone knew me. I went to primary school in the area. Most of the people that were involved went to the same primary school or...there's 4/5 primary schools in that area so it's a small community. Everyone knows everyone, everyone knows everyone's business, their names, their address, so yeah, it just started off as chilling with them (Natasha, 6-15)

As she continued to reflect on this process, she spoke about her brother, who did not become involved in gangs. She described her brother as an exception to the

norm by not becoming involved and implied that having a successful job continues to prevent him from taking this path. Perhaps, gang activity is also a job, but a less “successful” one.

I'm just very happy it didn't happen for my brother. He's working for a successful company. I love my baby brother, he's so inspirational (Natasha, 190-192).

From her perspective, her brother is more resilient as he was more protected from factors that led her to become involved, particularly witnessing less violence than her, over a shorter period of time. She alluded to the long-term impact of her early childhood experiences.

I: What do you think it was that led you to get involved and him not get involved?

N: He saw me, he's smarter than I am. He just learned from my mistakes. Although we were brought up in the same house, by the same people, I got affected [by the violence] more than he did. One, I was around it a lot longer and witnessed a lot more than he did. He doesn't remember most of it, which I'm really thankful for. (Natasha, 194-202)

Three of the young women had older family members in gangs. Natasha described being born into gang involvement and being aware of her parent's involvement from a young age. She recalled learning from her dad about gang activity, and specifically what ‘council’ is.

Council is like basically when you go out of London, all of those places that are proper out of the area.....country side, which is why it's called council for short and that's when you go to sit in one little trap house or someone's house there and you sell whatever your selling (Natasha, 95-100)

She described accompanying her father when he was transporting drugs and portrayed this as a leisurely day out together, which highlights the ordinariness of gang involvement within her family.

I knew what counc was from my dad. I used to counc with my dad, me and him would pick up. I'd be like "dad, you're selling the green stuff", so from like 3 years old I was with him. We'd take a drive, he used to call it running. (Natasha, 135-139)

She reflected on how being around gangs for extended periods of time and being exposed to activity inevitably leads to involvement, as if involvement is transmittable.

Natasha: But my mums even been affected by gangs when you even check it

Interviewer: It sounds like it's been around you and your family for a long time...

Natasha: From the beginning of time, it was never not there. It was definitely going to happen. (Natasha, 182-189)

All of the young women spoke about gang-related violence being a common experience in the areas they grew up in. Amber recalled vivid memories of stabbings within the area. Her description and use of language suggests that she became desensitised to gang-related violence.

It's really weird because growing up my mum would call me up and be like, Amber, you've got to come home like straight away because there's been a stabbing on the road in front of my house or something and I'd be like okay cool. (Amber, 63-67)

3.3.2 Transition to becoming involved

It was difficult for the young women to recall the specifics of when they first became involved. This was apparent in Violet and Chloe's responses, which suggest that becoming involved in a gang is a blurred process with no definitive start point.

Emm, the first time I ended up in a gang was...How did I get involved the first time?... (Violet, 9-11)

How I first got involved?...Hmmm.....It feels like a long time ago (Chloe, 6-7)

All of the participants described how their involvement stemmed from friendships and/or relationships with people who were already gang involved. While Chloe avoided blaming others, there was a sense of passivity in her becoming involved. There appeared to be no intentionality or decision-making. This makes it particularly difficult for young women (or their networks) to identify entry pathways to avoid.

It's so easy to get involved in a gang, so easy. You don't have to do nothing. You just have to be friends with someone (.....) But I wasn't really...when I was there I wasn't really dragged into it, I got myself in it but it wasn't intentional. It was more just...just happened. (Chloe, 312-353)

Three of them explained how they unintentionally became part of the gang after they entered into relationships with males who were already gang involved. Violet says;

So I went to live with my boyfriend and from then his friends were all in the gang so because I was chilling with him I just ended up being in the gang by accident.. (Violet, 13-18)

Natasha reflected on how their identity as gang members was constructed by others and as a result she began to view herself in this way.

No, it just happens. The same, I didn't know I was in (gang name) until they were like "yeah, you're a (gang name) girl" (Natasha, 319-321).

All of the participants reflected on the impact of societal beliefs and assumptions on a person's experiences and behaviour. Chloe talked about how being labelled as a gang resulted in her group actively taking on this identity and behaving accordingly.

I never saw it as a gang. Just like the media, the media label people a lot. They point at a group of people. That's what I was saying to my friends. When people see a group of people, more than 3 people, they automatically assume it's a gang. It's not a gang. We're friends. We're friends.

I: I see. So it feels like it's actually people putting that label on you even though that's not how you see it yourselves?

Yeah, and that itself made us feel.....if they're labelling us as a gang, we might as well call ourselves a gang really. What made it a gang was the criminal activity we started doing. (Chloe, 28-40)

Amber described a similar process, as she raised the idea of the 'self-fulfilling prophecy' being a reason for gang involvement. She reflected on society holding a lack of hope for the future of some young people and the oppressive experiences they are faced with. She disapproves of the individual blame placed on young people for becoming gang involved, due to the failure to acknowledge the crucial role that society plays. She also implied that there is a lack of connection to wider systems, which might otherwise be able to support to young people.

When you [wider society] sit there and tell a kid that they are going to amount to nothing, all you do is mess about, they are going to think, what is the point in going to school, what is the point in trying. I'm not going to succeed at my GSCE's, I'm not going to get into college, I'm not going to achieve anything. I'm not going to be any different to the people that I see

sitting at the bottom of the stairs smoking weed, so why don't I just do that now. And I think that's also a bit messed up. (Amber, 265-279)

3.4 Getting Involved; Survival

While gang involvement was described as a natural process, it also emerged that within their social contexts, Violet, Natasha and Chloe were faced with various adversities. This meant their psychological and physical needs were not being met through typical means, such as family relationships, within school and in their social lives. As a result, they had to find their own means of survival. Although Amber described having some involvement in a gang, this was for a shorter period of time and less direct than the experiences the other young women described. Interestingly, her social context was considerably different to the others. She spoke about various protective factors within her life, which she identified as preventative in her becoming further involved in a gang. Therefore, although there were differences in the level of gang involvement, the themes were consistent; when their needs were not met within their social context, the young women had to find alternative ways of getting their needs met. The idea of survival relates to 'circle of life' and reinforces the influence that a person's environment has on their experiences. There are three sub-ordinate themes in terms of survival; physical and emotional protection, financial security, and escapism through drugs and alcohol.

3.4.1 Physical and emotional protection

All of the participants described turning to a gang when there is a lack of physical and emotional security within a person's life. Violet powerfully shared her perspective on the main reason for gang involvement.

The problem for most people is that no one else loves them. That's why they get involved. (Violet, 1263-1265)

Three of the young women experienced physical abuse within their family contexts. Violet was forced to leave her mother's home and went to live with her extended family, who she was physically abused by. As a result, she moved in with her father but experienced further rejection when she was forced to leave and had nowhere else to go. When she recalled being "chucked out" of her father's home she said;

And I was like "cool" and I ended up sleeping in the place where basically everyone chills to chill, to sleep. (Violet, 559-564)

There is a real sense of instability and uncertainty within the context of Violet's home life, whereas with the gang, she knew she had somewhere to stay. Chloe was taken into care after longstanding physical abuse from her mother and lived in several placements, therefore lacking a secure base.

She [mum] used to get angry, take things out on me, hit me, physically batter me for no reason. All the time I was with my mum I was locked in my room....I used to lock myself in my room because I was really scared. Even when I went to sleep I would lock myself in my room because I was scared of what my mum was capable of doing (.....) It was that summer when I was 16 that I got taken away. They put me in different homes and stuff and that's when I got involved in gangs and stuff. (Chloe, 541-559)

Physical abuse was also recurrent within Natasha's family, as she witnessed her mother being abused by her father and she herself experienced physical abuse from her mother.

It was normalised to me to see violence against women. I knew it wasn't nice but I'm thinking "oh well". My mum would get beat up but I didn't care because my mum used to abuse me, so it was like, she was getting punched for hitting me so I didn't really care. (Natasha, 154-161)

She talked about her feelings towards her mother and described how as a child she developed a strong desire to be physically distant from her, as a way of keeping herself safe and free from the abuse. Being part of the gang allowed this distance, as she moved into the “trap house”.

The fact that my dad told me “don’t ever suffer in silence”. When my mum used to beat me. I’ve got scars all over my body from my mum. I don’t blame my mum though, at all. I hated her. If you had come to me when I was 9 years old and offered to kill her for me I’d be like “yessss, yesss, I’m free” I swear down. (Natasha, 768-773)

Amber’s story of her home life is strikingly different to the others. She described her mum and school as preventing her from becoming further involved in a gang. She speculated that she would feel less hopeful about her future if these protective structures had not been in place.

If I didn’t have my mum, didn’t have school, didn’t have these things, then why would I feel the need. Why would I think that life gets better? (Amber, 578-582)

Although the young women all described experiences of violence and betrayal in the gang, they also speak about how gangs can offer a sense of protection and a way to feel safe in their community. Amber reflected on how her connections to the gang have enabled her to feel safe within the estate.

I’ve felt safe because they’re protective towards me. I can walk home at 3 in the morning and I wouldn’t feel the need to swerve anyone. I’ll see the guys, I’ll chat to them and I’d be perfectly safe. I don’t feel the need to runaway. I feel lucky in that sense because I know that a lot of people don’t feel like that when they see a group of people standing outside their door. (Amber, 763-783)

Chloe compared her experience of living in an abusive home context where she constantly felt unsafe, to being part of the gang, where she felt “untouchable”.

When I was part of it...I felt good, I felt untouchable. I felt untouchable. Like no one can touch me, no one can talk to me in any way because I have these people who can protect me. That's how I felt. (Chloe, 90-93)

All of the young women described gangs as an alternative family, which relates to the protection that they offer. Amber described the psychological need for a family, which people will search for elsewhere if they do not have a sense of this within their own family context.

Also, I think we need to acknowledge that gangs are giving people a family that they haven't had before which is a big thing. We all need a pack, a family. It gives people a place to go, a purpose in a way. (Amber, 740-747)

Natasha reflected on having an alternative family within the gang, who like a typical family, look out for each other.

At the time, for me, it was like...I didn't look at it like a gang. I looked at it as family, as friends, family, like because these people, yeah I looked out for them but they looked out for me to (Chloe, 25-28)

For Violet, she described experiencing a sense of family within the gang and a lack of this outwith, which pushed her back into gang involvement.

After I came back. I'd left them the first time, gone back to my actual family who have done me bad, I've come back again and you lot are alright. So why do I keep leaving, that's how I looked at it. Why do I keep putting myself in that position, to go home and everyone just treats me bad. I might as well stay here. (Violet, 611-620)

3.4.2 Financial security

All of the young women spoke about 'money making' being a primary reason for becoming involved. They described how gang activity provides a way to fund the realities and hardships of life. This was particularly important for those who described having to fend for themselves, and others. Interestingly, they all mentioned gang activity as a way to meet the basic need of being able to afford for food. When Amber was reflecting on her friends who are still gang involved, she challenged the assumption that people partake in gang activity to fund expensive and materialistic items.

It's not like the money they make just goes on their shoes. This is money, which is paying for their houses, their mums, putting food on the table for their kids. They are not going to sit there and be like "I'm going to stop this" to go and get a job which pays a tenth of what I'm paid in a week (Amber, 409-507)

For the three young women who described becoming deeply involved in gangs, there was a sense that they were forced to grow up at a young age, due to the responsibilities placed on them. When Violet compared her life to other young women of a similar age she appeared to idealise the support they receive from their parents.

But it's hard because not everybody understands that not everyone lives at home, do you get what I'm saying? Everyone lives at home where their mum's going to give you money, if you stay in and do your dishes, your mum's going to give you change just for doing nothing. If you wake up and you make your bed, mum's going to give you money. You know ones that don't have that. I don't have that lifestyle, I don't live at home, I have to feed myself (Violet, 435-449)

All of the young women spoke about gang involvement fulfilling the basic need of feeding oneself (and others), which contributes to the idea of a gang offering a

means for survival. Violet spoke about how she began selling drugs as she was unable to pay her rent. She felt overwhelmed by the responsibilities forced on her at age 16 and she was receiving no support or guidance with this.

I started selling drugs because my rent is £800 a month, I'm 16 years of age, how the fuck am I going to find £800 a month then I've still got to put...I mean I don't know what type of electric he done but he's got some sort of weird electric where you've got to put £25 electric on a week and it's still not enough. And I still don't have food in the house. I've got to put the food in the house. It was just too much. (Violet, 540-552)

Violet not only has to financially support herself, but she also provided money to her mother and sister. Throughout the interview she reflected on how she was forced to grow up due to a lack of protection from her parents. She challenged the discourse of individual blame by emphasising that she is doing her best to cope with the struggles that she has been faced with.

Even though I don't live at home, I still give my mum money do you get what I'm saying so it's not like I'm just fending for myself. I'm fending for my mum and my sister...So either either, no one can actually fault what I'm doing because more times than not I'm trying to feed quite a few people out here (Violet, 462-475)

Chloe also reflected on having no support from others and feeling unable to cope with the pressures placed on her. This led her to seek out a way to make money. However, it “escalated” and became out of control again.

It was the circumstances I was living in. I had no money, I was going through problems with the housing, because I was so young, I didn't know how to apply for housing benefit, apply for job seekers or income support....I didn't know any of these things so I got myself into big rent arrears and I didn't know how to deal with my life at that time. I had no help, no one was helping me. So the next thing I resorted to was asking my

friends, “okay, I need to make money, how can I make money?” and it just escalated from there (Chloe-48-57)

Natasha recalled how she returned to gang activity when she was pregnant, after struggling to make enough money through legal means. She spoke about having to fully immerse oneself in the gang.

But then we got broke at one point and he had to jump on it, I had to jump on it, even when I was pregnant. But that wasn't because I wanted to be on the road. It was a money making scheme. (Chloe, 502-506)

She did not feel as though she had a choice as she had to look after her daughter.

Most of my baby's first nappies and outfits came from that money. It's something I had to do. (Natasha, 513-514)

3.4.2 Escapism through drugs and alcohol

Violet, Natasha and Chloe all described the gang as a means of accessing alcohol and drugs, with Natasha explaining that there is a “*never ending supply of weed, never ending supply of fags*” (Natasha, 252-253). They spoke about alcohol and drugs in a social sense, but also as a means of escaping abusive experiences, and then having to stay in the gang to feed the addictions. Natasha describes how alcohol and drug taking was a way of coping with previous experiences of abuse and suggests that she was attempting to suppress difficult emotions.

In the past, I had thoughts but never actually acted on it. There are other ways to cope. Smoking a spliff to be quite honest. After I've smoked a spliff I'm like “yeahhhh”. And that's when the normalisation comes in because I know there's a technique that I've got. (Natasha, 358-363)

Violet reflected on how she began smoking cannabis as way to cope with a difficult home environment. She describes how she began smoking at a young age but

how this progressed into drug use and eventually gang activity became a way to fund her addiction.

“Do you know what I’m saying? So being there just drove me crazy. So I had to start smoking weed, before I had only been smoking fags so like, that family is just crazy.....” (Violet 514-518).

3.5 Being Involved – ‘A Double-Edged Sword’

When experiences of gang involvement were explored, the idea of a ‘double-edged sword’ emerged. There are three subordinate themes; peer relationships, ‘ride or die’, and gender and power. A ‘both-and’ narrative emerged where experiences within the gang involvement were described as both positive and negative. This depicts a complex picture of the experiences of gang involvement for females.

3.5.1 Peer relationships

A number of the experiences associated with gang involvement were described within the context of peer relationships, which were particularly important to these young women. They reflected on having a space to be together, feeling disconnected to adults in their lives, and fitting in with their peer group and wider society. The young women spoke about gang involvement providing them with something to do with their peers. Three of the young women identified youth clubs as being protective and considered the impact of government cuts, which have led to closures of social facilities. This was important as the removal of these facilities meant there were reduced spaces to be together. Chloe personalised this experience as she reflected on society failing to look after young people. This sense of failure perhaps leads young people to feel unmotivated to look after society.

There’s society, government, things the government cuts. Like they’ve cut youth clubs, stuff like that. I used to go to the youth club...I used to stay

there until it was finished and it used to keep me out of trouble, but as soon as the government started cutting things, started doing these things to us, I think that's one of the reasons people would get back into it because of what's happening. They don't understand, they're the ones who label us, but we're not gangs, we're just friends. (Chloe, 462-470)

Amber insinuated that if you do not have youth clubs, you are more exposed to gangs and forced to grow up, and as a result, become part of the gang, which she suggests is not normal for a teenager.

Growing up I went to [youth club]. It gave us an area to be kids. Some people are only doing what they're doing because they've been forced to grow up. When we go to the youth club, see friends, play pool, it gives us the chance to be a normal teenager. Even if it's for a couple of hours (Amber, 465-473)

Three of the young women described fond memories of the gang, particularly when the purpose was to “chill” and “hang out” together, as if the gang was a sanctity to be with people their own age. Natasha described a summer spent with the gang, which seems reflective of a typical adolescent.

She'd come get me, we'd walk up to the park, to the side where I knew all the mandem would be and we'd just chill. There would be no criminal activity going on. There would be no violence, nothing. We were just chilling. The only criminal activity would be smoking a spliff. That was just us. I'd be doing someone's hair, someone's probably play fighting, it was proper, summertime especially, ohhh it was so nice. (Natasha, 555-563)

Similarly, Chloe spoke about how gang involvement gave her and her peers something to do. Perhaps doing something together made her feel more purposeful than doing something on her own.

Always doing something, going to the park, going west-end, just some pointless nights, get on the bus and just do pointless things (Chloe, 451-453)

These young women appeared to be disconnected from the adults in their life, and perhaps, as a result, gravitated to people more their own age. The young women spoke about the excitement of risk within the gang, which they related to their life stage at the time of involvement. Natasha explained that as an adolescent, she felt a need to be included and a desire part of it, rather than being an outsider looking in.

But there's always drama, but at that age, that's what you live for (...) You wanna be where the drama is, you wanna be, you don't want to hear the story from someone else. You want to tell the story. You want to see it from your own eyes. (Natasha, 254-263)

The pressure to look good and fit in within the group and within wider society also emerged.

I was mixing myself with big men because of who they were and their status, out on the streets. I kind of found that attractive, to be honest. I found it really attractive because why wouldn't that attract a 16 year old? The big cars, the money, that life, it attracted me a lot and that's why I got into it. (Chloe, 77-83)

3.5.2 'Ride or die'

'Ride or die' is a metaphor that is often associated with gang involvement and this is reflective of the experiences that the females described. This relates to the idea of joining a gang to survive, and subsequently having to 'get on board' with the gang in order to be accepted, which they all spoke about. Furthermore, their use of language fits with the idea of 'ride or die', as they described "having to jump on it" and having to be "ready for this road life". There were divergences in their

experiences as Amber spoke about feeling unwilling to give up aspects of her life to be accepted in the gang. Violet, Natasha and Chloe, on the other hand, appeared to fully commit to the gangs they were part of by choosing this life over their old ones.

Violet described how she initially resisted surrendering friendships from outside the gang.

Interviewer: So what happened when you did actually become involved in the gang? How was it different from before?

Violet: Em....(yawn)...it was hard because my boyfriend was telling me I couldn't chat to certain people because....em...because they're from the other side but I'm trying to say I grew up with these people. It's literally my mum's estate, you can't tell me who I can or can't chat to...(Violet, 180-192)

However, she explained that if she were to maintain relationships with certain people, she would not be trusted. This resulted in her sacrificing old relationships to be accepted within the gang. Once the females committed to the gang, they were expected to 'ride' alongside them, otherwise risks emerged. Chloe conveyed gang involvement be an all-encompassing way of life that one needs to get on board with to survive.

And that's why, when you get involved in a gang and you wanna be, you want to have that status you have to be ready, you have to be up for it, for this road life, because if you're not you have no chance. No chance of surviving this (Chloe, 231-235)

She explained that when a person's motivation is to protect themselves by staying out of trouble, their loyalty is questioned and the consequences of this can appear worse than the risks of getting involved.

And also...say if someone in your group gets into a problem with someone else, and then they start fighting and then you don't get involved,

afterwards, the repercussions after....they'll look at you and think "you didn't do anything, why are you even there, you're a snake, you're this, you're that" [.....], you just want to stay out of trouble but you get labelled as that around the area and then it gets hard to live around the area because everyone who knows things about you like that....yeah. (Chloe, 214-227)

3.5.3 Gender and power

The participants all reflected on what it means to be a female within the context of a gang. There was a consensus that males were more powerful, which links to the roles and expectations of females, which will be outlined below.

3.5.3.1 *Women are less violent than men*

The young women all spoke about differences in gender roles and expectations within the gang. One theme that developed was that females are assumed to be less violent. Violet suggested that there are different levels of gang involvement and that females are not expected to participate in more serious acts of violence. Therefore, within the context of being violent, females are more protected, than males, from the risks of being involved. However, this perpetuates the powerfulness of males and the expectations of females to fulfil other roles.

Especially for girls, it's not that deep. If you were a boy, then cool, you need to shoot that person and if you don't shoot that person we're gonna fuck you up sort of thing (Violet, 329-333).

Violet reflected on occasions that she behaved in a violent way, perhaps as an attempt to achieve power and respect. However, this was questioned due to her being female. This implies that there gendered expectations within gangs that both males and females must adhere to.

People were like; no, you're a girl, you're not meant to be doing these type of things (Violet, 433-435)

Amber and Chloe reflected on the roles of females within the gang, which from their experiences were auxiliary to the males. Amber gave the example of females assisting males by carrying drugs. She reflected on being judged and treated differently by the gang, and by society, based on being a female, and as a result being less likely to be stopped by the police.

There are girls on the outskirts and yeah I know a couple of girls who are full on gang members but most of them carry weed in their bras and they drop it off to someone. Girls don't get stopped by the police as much so it's like....the role is to transport goods. I could walk down the street with basically a whole stack of weed in my bag and as long as it doesn't stink no one is going to look twice at me. They'll think that I'm a girl coming from school. (Amber, 319-332)

Chloe also spoke about assumptions of females and how this restricts them from the more powerful, "money making" roles.

It's different for women. It really is (.....) They treat you....different. Sexism shall I say? Money making aspects of it. We can't do this because we're women, kind of thing (Chloe, 244-249)

Natasha identified sexism within the gang she was part of. As a way of protecting herself, she questioned the status quo by attempting to take a stand against misogynistic and abusive behaviours. She did this by fighting males, thereby embodying traits associated with masculinity to create an image of herself as strong.

I'm a fighter [.....] I think that was where I got my reputation because people would know not to fuck with me because I would fuck you up no matter how tall you are, how wide you are, I'm gonna mash you up. And that was my survival technique. I was thinking, after a while I was like "no, I'm not having another male take the piss out of me". It was just another way of

*me trying to figure out how to protect myself, but, it was just always drama.
(Natasha, 256-278)*

One might assume that because females are perceived as less violent, they would be protected from violence within the gang. However, Violet, Natasha and Chloe all spoke about experiences of violence from other gang members, in the context of gang conflict, and also within their relationships. Natasha and Chloe reflected on times they had been stabbed. For both, it seems as though the seriousness of what happened became more apparent on reflection, due to stabbings being commonplace and expected within the context of the gang. They both revealed their scars during the interviews, perhaps to emphasise the seriousness and permanence of their experiences.

This (shows me scar) – I got into a fight with two girls and I don't know how it happened because it was just quick, everything happened so quick. When I got up I was bleeding from my face. Someone else said "you're bleeding, you're bleeding", gave me tissue and stuff, but I didn't feel it, I didn't feel it because it was the adrenaline. But yeah, that, yeah I think that's a negative stuff. The violence. (Chloe, 194-200)

Experiences of violence relate to the 'ride or die' mantra, as the young women described how violence occurs when you offend someone in the group or if you are unwilling to take risks, which results in your loyalty being questioned.

Like, you know when you don't want to do something, right, but you have....you get put in the position where you have to do it because if you don't do it, well it's your friend, and if you don't do it then they'll fall out with you, or they can beat you up, or even stab you. I mean I've been sliced. I've been sliced here (shows me) (Chloe, 178-183).

3.5.3.2 Sex as an expectation

All of the young women spoke about sex within the gang. There were different experiences and perspectives in regards to this but there was a consensus between all participants that a primary role of females within the gang is to have sex with males. They describe females being treated in a disrespectful and derogatory way.

I: And is that an expectation of all females?

N: in the gang life, yeah. That's what you're there for. You ain't there for any other reason. (Natasha, 470-473)

It's just ridiculous that people think that if you have a vagina and they have a penis, that's just what's supposed to happen. (Natasha, 350-352)

The boys used to get sexual with us and stuff like that. Treat us like prostitutes basically. Like we're shit. (Chloe, 250-251)

Natasha described not having the option to consent to sex and being pressurised to have sex.

I was so scared, I was thinking "is he really going to rape me, is he really going to do it". Before he was doing it undercover, roll over on me, do his thing, and go back to sleep. (Natasha, 522-526)

She reflected on a time when she was unable to refuse because she was in the person's house, as if she was his property and she owed him sex in return for being there.

But yeah, we were at his house and one of my friends was trying to pressure me to sleep with him and I don't like this guy like that. He's a good friend, sort of. But I ended up having to do it because I was in that situation. I was in his house. (Natasha, 343-348)

It also emerged that despite sex being an expectation of females, it is often used against them and they are blamed and viewed in a derogatory way for this behaviour. Natasha spoke about how she attempted to create and take ownership of her reputation. It was as if she purposely claimed the identity of a “slag” to reduce the power that others had over her, of using her behaviour against her.

When I was in school I used to jump out to get my nails done, jump out to get mandem, and the only reason why I saved myself from being called a slag is because I admitted it. If I didn't, I would be tarnished with that name and my reputation would be completely tarnished. But no one can turn round and tell you “Natasha's a slag, Natasha's a ho, Natasha's this” (Natasha, 422-429)

Violet, on the other hand, was blaming of females who are positioned within the role of having sex with males and distanced herself from them. She implied a degree of choice and control in this, perhaps taking on the views of the males in the gang, and wider society.

I knew the girls around him were slags. You think I'm gonna let my boyfriend be around these ho's who will do the naked woman. Do you know what the naked woman is? (...) It's when they get naked and lay there, wait for the boy to walk in (laughs). What do you expect to happen other than get fucked? You're going to get fucked and you think you're gonna do that to my boyfriend? No no no. I don't do the nasty things that these girls do. Let him get drunk and come and suck off his dick. (Violet, 897-915)

3.5.3.3 Having a boyfriend in the gang

Violet, Natasha and Chloe all had boyfriends in the gangs they were part of. This again raised the idea of the double-edged sword. Although they earned respect from their status as girlfriends from other gang members, there was a lack respect from their boyfriends. Natasha and Chloe's boyfriends were both regarded as leaders within the gang. Natasha explained that having a baby with a head

member earned her respect and she was no longer pressurised to be involved in the gang activity. This led her to feel powerful, in a sense.

No one is going to curse me for not being around when my baby father is their older. So they look up to him. I was still connected but I didn't have to do anything. They just knew me there now. It'd be like "alright stranger, where you been hiding yourself?" But yeah I didn't need to be as active anymore, not an active gang member (Natasha, 626-633)

Chloe also experienced higher status, respect and protection when she began dating her ex-boyfriend.

One of the gangs I was in, I was dating the main boss of the gang...in that I felt like I got status because of him. I was respected by everyone else. Everyone else was scared of him so if anyone messed with me, they messed with him, and they didn't want to mess with him, so they didn't want to mess with me. (Chloe, 264-269)

Violet and Natasha both described how they very suddenly found themselves in these relationships. They suggest how the decision to be in a relationship was made by the men and they acquiesced, which may relate to the gendered power differences.

I moved out of my dads when I was 16. That's how I met my daughter's dad. I was going to collect dinner and he saw me walking all nice and spicy at the side of the road (Natasha, 60-63)

And to be honest the boyfriend that I was with, how I ended up in the gang, I didn't know he was my boyfriend until 2 weeks into the relationship which is really mad. He come to my house one time to bring my best friend weed, yeah, and he didn't go home. He didn't go. He just wouldn't go home. I picked him up from the train station and he was like; you're my girlfriend. (Violet, 658-668)

There is a sense of idealisation as Natasha reflected on her ideas and hopes of how a relationship should be and her desire to be cared for and protected.

This grown man is looking after me, he's feeding me, we're going out couch together, do you know what I mean? It was a stupid child's dream of what a relationship should be like. (Natasha, 618-622)

Within these relationships, the females appeared to experience a lack of power and control. Like Natasha, Chloe reflected on feeling cared for and protected by her boyfriend, while also she feeling restricted and controlled. She also had to make sacrifices by ending longstanding friendships. There is a sense that these young women accepted the constraints of the relationships by focusing on the positive aspects, such as the status and the intimacy, which was lacking in their lives. Furthermore, because of the power that these men held, these young women appeared to be appreciative that they were chosen to be their girlfriends.

That's how I got in because he fell in love and didn't let me go nowhere. From when I moved in it was done, it was over. "I'm going to the shop", "you're going to the shop for what – I'll go, if you're hungry I'll buy you food, you wanna smoke, I'll buy you weed, If you're thirsty I'll buy you drinks". Always "where are you going" (.....) From then I knew he was crazy. But we got really close. (Violet, 703-730)

Natasha and Chloe both described accepting violence as part of the relationship; not realising how vulnerable they were until they had come out of the relationships. Natasha described violence and rape as a consequence of saying no to sex, which she experienced throughout her relationship and into her pregnancy. She relates this to her early experiences of being sexually abused as a child and powerfully uses the metaphor of being "broken" to describe the impact of these experiences. There is a sense that it feels surreal to now imagine herself in this situation.

I was vulnerable and I was broken, a broken kid. So if anyone said “open your legs” I knew just to do that because being in situations where I’ve been beat up if I didn’t do that. And as I said my baby father carried on even doing it even when I was pregnant. In fact, after my daughter was born. It’s weird when I say it though because it don’t even sound like I’m talking about me. (Natasha, 436-444)

She reflected on the long-term impact of being in an abusive relationship and described how she has moved from being “broken” to having “cracks”. She highlights the painful process of her experiences and it is as if she is rebuilding herself.

“It’s not like “I’m broken, this is how it’s going to be”. It’s just coping. Trying to figure out how can I better my life, even though I’ve got some cracks. I see an outline of me and it’s like I’ve got cracks on the side and some positive comes in and fills in this image but the cracks are there, some spilling out...” (Natasha, 642-648).

Chloe also spoke about her experiences of physical abuse and went onto hypothesise that her boyfriend’s behaviour was a result of his status as a man. She acknowledged that she accepted the negative aspects of the relationships by focusing on the positive aspects.

Maybe it’s because of the status they have, they think they can talk to and treat people the way they want to because of who they are and I think it’s wrong. Now I see it...now...now...now I see it like that because back then I didn’t. I didn’t see it like that. Back then I was more...I was just...I was more attracted to the life, to the cars, to the clothes, to the money, that the hitting and the verbal abuse, the mental abuse didn’t really come into it because I was attracted to all that (Chloe, 290-298)

Chloe shared a turning point for her, when a friend who was also in an abusive relationship, was killed by her partner. She reflected on being in a similar position

to her friend, as they both experienced physical abuse within their relationships. There was a major realisation that she was also at risk of being killed. Furthermore, there was a shift from feeling as though she had to live with it, to feeling as though she had the choice to leave.

So I used to have to live with it, for over two years, until one of my friends passed away, a girl, and she passed away because her boyfriend killed her. When that happened it was a big slap in the face with no hand for me because I thought to myself 'I'm on my way there, I'm actually on that route' (...) I saw my life flashing through my eyes and I said to myself 'if I stay in this relationship, I'm going to die'. And I got out of it. I went to the police and told the police everything. (Chloe, 298-310)

Although Chloe managed to leave this relationship, she moved areas and became re-involved with another gang, which provided the needs mentioned in section 3.2 'Getting Involved – Survival' (i.e. physical and emotional protection as well as financial security). Furthermore, this was also described as a natural process as the gang was situated in the area that she moved to and she already had personal connections to it.

3.6 Getting Out and Staying Out

The four young women no longer identify as gang-involved. When exploring the process of getting and staying out two subordinate themes developed; wanting a better life for yourself (and others) and difficulty moving on.

3.6.1 Wanting a better life for yourself (and others)

Violet decided to leave the gang after her boyfriend had been unfaithful to her with several other females in the gang. As a result of being betrayed, she no longer wanted to be part of the gang.

I was like “oh my days” what did I do. I’m trying to leave and am thinking like, I’m not going to be in a cheating relationship because you think it’s acceptable, like it’s not going to work like that. He was just crazy. (Violet, 750-756)

She spoke about the difficulties of leaving the gang as it is easier to be asked to leave as opposed to choosing to leave. Therefore, Violet framed it in a way for him to allow her to leave as opposed to initiating it herself.

How did I leave? Because he was like I’m going to give you a chance ‘init. I’m going to give you an option, you can carry on chatting with these lot or you can chat to us. I was like, well I’ve known these lot all of my life I’m not gonna slay them so what we gonna do? He was like “cool, go home if you want” I was like packing my stuff (laughing), I’m leaving, cool, left. (Violet, 760-770)

Leaving the gang was a complicated process as she experienced threats from the gang after leaving. She later returned to the same gang after she found out her boyfriend at the time was involved in the gang, six months into their relationship. Amber also experienced the gang making the decisions for her. After becoming involved in gang activity, she was turned away from being accepted into the gang because the ‘head’ members knew her mother and therefore felt protective of her.

With them, I’ve been turned away from their gang simply because they know my mum. I suppose I’m lucky in that sense. (Amber, 196-199)

Natasha and Chloe both had babies, which provided them with a new and purposeful identity as mothers, and as a result, their priorities changed. When Chloe was pregnant she was almost sent to prison but because she was pregnant she was given a lesser sentence. She reflected on feeling terrified of going to prison and was grateful for being given a second chance, which motivated her to pursue a life outwith the gang.

I just saw life different. That kind of life was either going to make me end up dead or in prison, because obviously I was so close to going to prison. I was so scared (.....) so I'm so grateful I got the chance to change (Chloe, 112-119)

Chloe was motivated to pursue a different life, not only because she was given a second chance, but also because she wanted to protect her son from the risks that involvement brings. She identified being pregnant as a turning point for her.

It's a different life I have now and I can't do the things I did before because of my son. (Chloe, 455-457)

Natasha left the gang when she found out she was pregnant. She attempted to create a new life for herself but when she had her baby, she returned to gang activity for a short period. Although she recognised the risks of being involved as a mother, she had no money and didn't feel as though she any other option.

It's something I had to do. I will never turn around and do it again because I have a lot more to loose but even then I had a lot to loose. (Natasha, 514-516)

Soon after, she moved into her own flat and stopped associating with the gang. However, she experienced challenges of escaping an abusive relationship.

And then I got my own place when she was a few months old but I had to leave because my baby's father came and attacked me in the house. Ripped up my stuff up, broke stuff. (Natasha, 519-523)

Natasha appeared to find strength in being a mother as her priority was to protect her daughter, which supported in facing the continuous challenges that she was confronted with. This appeared to feel like an endless battle for her.

I want to be the best mother I possibly can. Me doing that I had to get rid of her dad. I had to stand up in court and give evidence against him. I had to move 100 times. (Natasha, 802-805)

All of the young women shared personal stories of witnessing the detrimental impacts of gang involvement on others and they reflected on the likelihood of either going to prison or being killed. Violet and Chloe both reflected on the fear of going to prison, which both of them narrowly escaped. There is a sense of learning from other people's experiences and wanting a better future for themselves.

Because I knew from when I was there the first time that half the people that I was in it have gone to jail. Do you get what I'm saying? (...) So we started this thing together a couple of years ago and I've come back a couple of years later and half the friends I had are gone and you lot are have got all these new friends. The reason you got all these new friends is because all of the old friends are in jail. You're trying to tell me that I should do what my old friends did....no no no no. (Violet, 395-412)

They all shared experiences of losing friends through deaths related to gang involvement and they reflected on how this could have happened to them. Chloe reflected on how she has attended more funerals than weddings, which is extremely powerful, given her age.

I was lucky enough to get out of it safely but some people are not. I mean I've got a lot of friends who are now not here with us because of this life. Losing people, it's a big thing. I mean I can honestly say to you I've been to more funerals than I have weddings. (Chloe, 235-239)

This was a turning point for her as she realised the danger of being involved.

When I started losing people as well to guns and knives, I started seeing things differently. It's not the life, it's just not the life. (Chloe, 403-305)

3.6.2 Difficulty moving on

The young women all spoke about factors that make it challenging to stay out of gang involvement. Violet, Natasha and Chloe all previously returned to gang involvement after leaving because of the challenges of life outwith the gang and the permanence of the gang identity. As mentioned, Natasha returned to gang involvement when she was pregnant because her and her partner had no money.

But that wasn't because I wanted to be on the road. It was a money making scheme. (Natasha, 504-506)

When Violet left the gang she experienced financial deprivation, which resulted in her becoming homeless. Furthermore, she returned to a family context that was abusive and rejecting, which led her wonder whether life is better in the gang than outwith.

After I came back. I'd left them the first time, gone back to my actual family who have done me bad, I've come back again and you lot are alright. So why do I keep leaving, that's how I looked at it. Why do I keep putting myself in that position, to go home and everyone just treats me bad? I might as well stay here. (Violet, 611-620)

Chloe reflected on socio-economic circumstances, such as financial pressures and government cuts, which restrict marginalised young people from creating a life for themselves and therefore make it difficult to stay out of gang involvement.

They're cutting all these things for us, making it harder for us to study, making it hard for us to live. Cutting our money like job centre, if you don't sign on you get sanctioned for three months....what's this person going to do for three months? They need to do something to get by, to eat, to smoke a cigarette...do you understand? (Natasha, 470-475)

In addition to financial pressures, the young women described the permanence of gang identity, which makes it difficult to move on. Three of the young women spoke about still being recognised and identified as gang members. Natasha spoke about when she moved out of area to get away from the gang and her shock of being not only recognised but almost killed by a rival gang.

My face is really known....I didn't know how known it was until I moved to a different area and I saw how many people even there knew my face. I was like "whaaaat?" Like my friends family that lived out there, some people from my school actually moved there and I didn't know. And I almost got killed by a gang there one time. And that really scared me. (Natasha, 225-232)

The young women describe no longer being protected after leaving the gang. Furthermore, three of the young women received threats from the gangs they were part of, as a consequence of leaving. Therefore, is understandable that a person is re-engage with gang involvement, as protection has been described as a key reason for joining. Chloe describes receiving threats from her ex boyfriend and his friends. As a result, she searched for protection elsewhere and joined another gang.

I couldn't come out of my house without looking over my back to see if he's there, if he's got his friends to come after me, and stuff like that..(Chloe, 314-316)

Although Violet was given permission to leave the gang, she received threats from her boyfriend.

And then it still didn't go down well because there was still problems, he was causing bare problems for me. He wanted to fuck me up and he was trying to get my own best friend, my own best friend, to line me up. She was going to line me up, it was crazy. Me and her stopped talking (Violet, 770-778)

These young women have had to make sacrifices and changes to their lives to avoid threats from the gangs, for example moving out of area and keep aspects of their identity hidden as a way of protecting themselves. Chloe explained;

I changed my life. Dramatically changed my life. I had to change my phone numbers, I had to change house, I had to move address, because people knew where I lived and if I didn't show up then they would come looking for me so I had to change everything. (Chloe, 106-111)

All of the young women spoke about the impact of being viewed in a narrow way and aspects of one's identity being overshadowed, because of gang involvement, which makes it more difficult to pursue a different path. Chloe reflected on how she is viewed by her family;

I'm still going through it now to be honest with you. I'm the black sheep of my family. I'm still going through it now, because of what I've done...being arrested, putting my family through stress, my mum, my nan. My mum already suffers from mental illness as well. They look at me and think "what are you going to do with yourself, you're just causing trouble". Stuff like that. (Chloe, 416-422)

The young women all spoke about perceptions from society. Natasha also raised the idea of the 'self-fulfilling prophecy', by considering the impact of oppression from society, and she also acknowledges the challenges that young people face in terms of employment.

Yeah, but they're not stupid intellectually. But because society is just making them feel that that's all they're good for and there aren't jobs there, of course they're going to continue with what they know best. (Natasha, 491-495)

Chloe shared her experiences of being judged in a narrow way and people making assumptions about her because of past behaviour. She reflected on the

permanence of her mistakes, as she is reminded of them through other people's perceptions and expectations of her.

"...all the good things I've done, they've all been forgotten and all the bad things I've done, they're still there and not forgotten. It makes me think sometimes, 'what's the point in trying to do something good if people are still going to use the bad against me'. That's like my family as well, they're always telling me "prove yourself...prove yourself...prove yourself". (Chloe, 501-507)

3.7 Summary

The results demonstrate interconnections between the superordinate and subordinate themes. Growing up around gangs was a factor in becoming involved across all participants. However, a need for physical and emotional protection, financial security and escapism from difficult contexts, led three of the young women to become further involved. For Amber, these needs were met elsewhere. Experiences of being involved in a gang are framed as a 'double-edged sword', as the young women described both positive and negative experiences. Although some positive experiences of gang involvement were described, the 'all or nothingness' of gangs, sexism, and experiences of violence and betrayal within relationships, makes it extremely difficult to survive, and thrive, within this context. The findings suggest that negative experiences can lead young women to question life in the gang. However, getting out was identified as a complex process, as intentions of staying out were found to be extremely challenging due to the permanency of gang involvement and the adversities of living in today's society. These challenges led three of the young women to re-engage with gang involvement; to fulfil their needs and to survive.

4.0 DISCUSSION

4.1 Chapter Overview

From the data analysis, four super-ordinate themes were identified; *Getting involved – ‘the circle of life’*, *Getting involved – survival*, *Being involved – ‘a double-edged sword’*, *Getting out and staying out*. I will firstly consider how the current research goes beyond previous research by highlighting the most unique themes and findings from the research. I will then apply the findings to the research question, and themes will be embedded within existing theories and literature, as explored in the introduction, to enable them to be situated within a wider context. There will be consideration of the methodological robustness, using Yardley’s (2008) criteria, followed by suggestions for future research and an outline of the clinical implications of the findings. I will close by offering personal reflections on the research process.

4.2 Addressing the Research Question – How do females make sense of their experience of being involved in gang activity?

4.2.1 New findings from the current research

The current findings go beyond previous research by offering a gendered perspective on gang involvement and offer an understanding of the conditions which can lead females to become gang involved (and re-involved). In particular, female gang involvement was found to be largely influenced by a person’s environmental and material conditions. Exposure to gangs from a young age meant that gang involvement was experienced as an inevitable and natural path. Furthermore, it often felt like the only way of surviving adverse contexts, in terms of fractured family relationships, difficult early experiences and socio-economic deprivation. Therefore, gang involvement can be a mechanism for getting one’s physical, emotional and financial needs met. Although the negative experiences of being involved in a gang appear to outweigh the positive ones and eventually lead to exiting of the gang, environmental and material factors can lead to re-

involvement, such as socio-economic deprivation, societal expectations of female gang members, and the permanency of the gang identity.

4.2.2 Situating the current research

4.2.2.1 *Getting involved; 'the circle of life'*

This theme suggests that gang involvement for these young women was largely determined by the presence of gangs within their ecosystem. With one of the young women describing gangs as being at the “root” of her estate. There was a sense of inevitability as they were surrounded by gang involvement from a young age, within their family and peer contexts. Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Model (1992) helps us understand this phenomenon, as gangs existed across their micro- (i.e. parent and peers) and exo- systems (i.e. social context).

This theme relates to the longstanding debate around the construct of a gang (e.g. Miller, 1980; Spergel, 1995; Klein, 1995; Short, 1996). The young women experienced difficulties in identifying when they first became involved in a gang. Not only did they experience this as a natural process, but they also reflected on identifying themselves as gang members after they were identified by other people in this way and as a result, they began to embody this identity. As narrative therapy explains, ‘thin descriptions’, which are often prescribed by powerful outsiders such as the media, often become the dominant story and as a result, impact on a person’s behaviour (White & Epston, 1990). For example, the discourse of gang-involved females being ‘sad, mad or bad’ (Brown, 2011) is likely to become embodied and acted out. Prentice (2000) explains that as young women are demonised by the media, they quickly become the problem and their own realities are obscured and ignored. However, the media fails to consider their role in creating this reality.

This finding also recognises the fluidity and transience of gangs that evolve and adapt over time, often in response to social structures, which can be explained by Social Control Theory (Hirschi, 1969) due to experiences of social adversity within the home and in the community and complex interpersonal relationships

influencing these young women to become involved in a gang. Furthermore, parents living within these contexts may not have the resources to monitor their children and/or be less present due to additional pressures (Thornberry, 2003).

4.2.2.2 *Getting involved; survival*

The second reason for joining a gang relates to survival and getting one's needs met, when needs are not being met in conventional ways. This experience appears to influence the extent of the young women's involvement. This fits with previous research, which suggests that gang-involved females tend to face disproportionate levels of adversity prior to gang involvement as compared to non-gang involved females (Campbell, 1984, 1990; De La Rue & Espelage, 2014; Miller, 2001; Voisin, King, Diclemente & Carry, 2014, Young et al 2007). The current findings suggest that when one's needs are being met across other contexts, it can protect a person from becoming further involved, as they do not turn to the gang as a way to survive.

More specifically, in the current study, a gang was described as offering physical and emotional protection as the young women who experienced threat and rejection within their family contexts turned to the gang for physical and emotional protection. The gang being viewed as an alternative family is consistent with previous research, which has found that a gang can provide refuge from hostile family units, resulting in a sense of belonging (Campbell, 1990; Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995; Joe Laidler & Hunt, 2001; Miller, 2001; 2008; Moore, 1991). In terms of physical protection, there is evidence that gang involved females experience a desire for safety, belongingness, and social support (Harris, 1988) and often turn to a gang as a means of protecting themselves from violence (Joe and Chesney-Lind, 1995; Lauderback et al 1992).

The young women all described living in areas of financial deprivation and the results found that one of the reasons for becoming involved in gang activity was to make money. CMM (Pearce & Cronen, 1980) and Smail's (1993) social materialist perspective can both help us to understand this, by considering the impact of wider social and political structures on a person's experiences and behaviour.

Furthermore, in relation to 'power mapping' (Hagan & Smail, 1997) the current

research sought to gain 'outsight' and highlights the role that 'distal' factors, such as unemployment, disaffection and inequalities play in influencing young women to become gang involved. Furthermore, the current research accentuates problems with focusing purely on 'proximal' factors by placing blame on individuals and/or their parents.

The females all mentioned having access to alcohol and drugs within the gang. On the surface, these could be classified as anti-social and irresponsible behaviours, which fits with discourses that are commonly used to describe the youth of today. A psychological perspective considers the reasons for, and the functions of, these types of behaviours. For these young women, alcohol and drug use appeared to be a response to adverse experiences and environments, and a mechanism for escapism.

4.2.2.3 Being involved; 'a double-edged sword'

Being involved was described as 'a double-edged sword' due to the positive and negative experiences of gang involvement. The current findings are consistent with previous research, which has found that females experience physical and sexual violence within gangs, whereas for others being part of a gang can offer the means to resist dominant gender stereotypes, while providing a sense of belonging and empowerment (Campbell, 1990; Joe and Chesney-Lind, 1995; Laidler and Hunt, 2001; Miller, 2001, 2008; Moore, 1991). These findings relate to the debate around whether gang involvement fulfils the 'social injury hypothesis' (Curry, 1998) or the 'liberation hypothesis' (Chesney-Lind, 1993). The current research demonstrates that experiences of gang involvement are not clear-cut as both positive and negative experiences can co-exist and relate to each other. The current findings are consistent with the 'both-and' perspective, which Miller (1996) refers to. While the young women described gangs as providing a sense of solidarity, a place to go and have fun, and a mechanism to escape the adversities they were faced with, they also described experiences of victimisation through physical and sexual violence. It could be argued that gang involvement is a way of liberating oneself from oppressive contexts, but inadvertently, further victimisation occurs.

The current findings go beyond biased media accounts, which tend to demonise gangs and pay little attention to the positive experiences that a gang can offer (Kinsella, 2001), and instead offer a more genuine and detailed account of female's experiences.

4.2.2.3.1 Peer relationships

The young women described how gang involvement allowed them to be with their peers. They attributed their age as a factor in influencing their motivation to be involved and accepted into a group. For them, gang involvement appeared to offer an opportunity for solidarity and belongingness. This fits with Erikson's (1968) theory of identity development, which argues that adolescents move away from being dependent on adults in their life towards being dependent on peers, while attempting to establish their identity. Furthermore, this is likely to be particularly true for adolescents who have not have the opportunity to be dependent on their parents, as the young women who described experiencing rejection and abuse within their family context became more involved in the gang. The young women all grew up in financially deprived communities and experienced violence across different domains of their lives. Becoming involved in a gang was perhaps a response to the marginalisation and disaffection they were facing. This fits with results from Young et al's (2007) research, which found that females usually lived in communities with high rates of violence and spoke about feeling safer in the presence of others than being alone. Furthermore, they described how gang involvement emerged from positive friendships, which fits with findings that peer relationships are a key social activity for young people in general, and females in particular (Burman, Brown & Batchelor, 2003). For young women who face disruption, abuse and neglect within their family life context, a peer group can offer a means to explore one's identity, while gaining approval from others and a sense of protection (Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995; Miller, 2001).

4.2.2.3.2 Ride or die

The results demonstrate an expectation of females to fully immerse themselves within the gang, which involved sacrificing other aspects of their lives and putting

themselves at risk to protect others. This fits with previous research, which has found there to be a strong emphasis on group loyalty within gangs (Cloward and Ohlin, 1960; Thrasher, 1927; Quicker, 1983).

The current findings suggest that one of the reasons that females join gangs is for protection but once involved, there is an expectation to defend oneself and others, and as a result, there are continuous experiences of victimisation. Therefore, the desire for protection is not always met. When Melde and colleagues (2009) explored whether perceived protection outweighs actual rates of victimisation they found that male and female gang members reported high levels of victimisation but low levels of fear. They suggest that gang involvement may be protective from an *emotive* point of view, i.e. feeling protected by a system, when in reality gang members are at increased risk of victimisation from other gangs and from their own members.

4.2.2.3.3 Gender and power

The young women all described gender differences within gangs, in relation to expectations, roles and power. They described an expectation of females to be less violent than males within the context of a gang. Similarly, the females in Laider and Hunt's (1997) study described how their boyfriends made efforts to ensure they adhered to the traditional female role. In the current research, some of the females described embodying masculine traits as a way to feel strong and establish power. This may be a response to oppressive and misogynistic contexts. This finding also questions media discourses surrounding 'the dark side of girl power' (Prentice, 2000). When young women embody masculine characteristics, it is often portrayed as *them* being the *problem* (Batchelor, 2007; Irwin & Chesney-Lind, 2008). The current research highlights the function, and benefit, of appearing more masculine within certain contexts.

The current findings suggest that the role of the females is commonly based on having sex with males. This fits with traditional literature which associates males with violence and females with sex (Thrasher, 1927/1963), and more recent research, such as Weller's (2010) study, which found that professionals reported

sexual exploitation, coercion and retaliation to be common experiences faced by females. The current research goes beyond the stereotypical portrayals of gender roles by exploring this from a female's perspective and highlights experiences of not having the option to consent to sex and/or being pressurised into sex. This finding opposes Thrasher's (1927/1963) research and current discourses, which blame females by describing them as "promiscuous". Interestingly, the current research found that this discourse has filtered down into the views of young women. For example, when Violet described the "naked woman" she placed the blame on the females, as opposed to considering what led them to take on this role or considering the man's choice to have sex with other females. This is reflective of Laider and Hunt's (1997) findings; that females in independent all-female gangs appeared to have more stable and dependable relationships with their gang "sisters", whereas in mixed-gender gangs males were more powerful and played a divisive role in the females' relationships with each other.

The current research found that having a boyfriend in the gang also generates both positive and negative experiences. A positive aspect of having a boyfriend in the gang is the status and respect that this brings, which can be difficult to achieve in other ways. There was a consensus in the current research that males held more power than females, and therefore being in a relationship with a male can enable a female to feel more powerful. This finding differs from Campbell's (1984, 1990) research, which found that a female's status in the gang is influenced equally or more so by female peers, compared to male peers and concluded that status is not dependent on sexuality or relationships with males. Perhaps this is due to differences between USA and UK gangs.

The females in the current research described violence within their intimate relationships, which fits with research from Laider and Hunt (1997), who also found this. The current research also found that females experienced sexual violence within their relationships, with one of the young women describing continuous experiences of rape from her partner. Attachment Theory's idea of internal working models (Bowlby, 1973), which considers the important effects of a child's emotional environment on their development and future experiences, could be useful in

understanding this. This theory proposes that a person's early relationship with their primary caregiver(s) is a template for their later relationships (Bowlby, 1979; Hazan & Shaver, 1987) and influences the expectations they have of support from others. The young women who were in abusive relationships all experienced abusive home environments.

The above findings question the blame placed on females by traditional research and media discourses. An example of this is Spergel (1964) who describes females as a threat to males within the context of a gang, due to the likelihood of them becoming pregnant. This is blaming of females and suggests a choice in having sex and becoming pregnant. Furthermore, it implies that females hold more power than males. The current research highlights that from the females' perspectives, becoming pregnant was in fact protective as it led them to escape violent and abusive relationships in order to protect their children.

4.2.2.4 Getting out & staying out

The current research found that the negative experiences of gang involvement lead these young women to question life in the gang. This fits with Erikson's (1968) theory of identity development, which argues that eventually adolescents must free themselves of this new dependency on peers in order to attain a mature identity which fits with their own values.

Getting out and staying out was described as a complex process of wanting a better life for oneself (and others), coupled with difficulty moving on due to the permanency of gang involvement and the challenges of succeeding within our society. This fits with previous studies that have also found leaving a gang to be a risky and a much more complex procedure than entering. Quicker (1983) refers to active and passive departures and identifies active departures as more risky as they are associated with betrayal, and violence and injury are a common consequence. Weller (2010) found that there are heightened risks for those females who challenge the regime of the gang, for example those who end relationships with members of the group and those who 'snitch'. In the current study, the three females who made the decisions to leave their gangs have since

experienced threats, and in some instances, violence and injury. When there is a heightened risk associated with exiting, it will inevitably prevent some women from doing so.

The current study found that the permanency of the gang identity, and the challenges of creating a life for oneself outside the gang, mean that people often re-engage with gang activity, again as a way to survive, and because gang involvement is familiar to them (i.e. 'the circle of life').

4.3 Critical Review

4.3.1 Evaluation of the research

As qualitative research seeks to answer different types of questions to quantitative research (Elliot et al, 1999), the same standards do not apply (Yardley, 2000). For this reason, qualitative research cannot be assessed using the conventional criteria for reliability and validity used in quantitative research (Smith et al, 2009). I will be drawing upon Yardley's four principles for assessing the trustworthiness of the current research.

4.3.1.1 Sensitivity to context

I have aimed to remain sensitive to the context throughout the course of the research, which can be demonstrated at different stages. IPA was selected based on the lack of phenomenological literature on this topic. Throughout data collection, analysis and interpretation, sensitivity was ensured in various ways. I consulted with professionals about ethical issues specific to the population and during the process of interviews I was aware of the potential emotional impact that may arise for the young women from talking about their experiences. I checked in with participants during the course of the interviews and there was an opportunity afterwards to reflect on the process. I have endeavoured to remain reflexive throughout the process by using a research diary (Appendix A). I have also considered my own assumptions and the impact these may have had on both the interviews and the analysis. The themes presented are offered as possible

interpretations of the data but these are not implied as 'truth'. My conclusions, suggestions for future research, and clinical implications have been considered in the context of existing research.

4.3.1.2 Commitment and rigour

Yardley (2008) states that the thoroughness of the study is a key principle of demonstrating validity in qualitative research. This was established in various ways and in line with the ethical approval. My commitment to the research is shown from my cautious approach to recruitment, which was conducted in accordance to the organisations that I recruited from and in line with the ethics board. I ensured participants were entirely informed about the reasons for the research and the process of participation. I was flexible about the time and locations of the interviews, while adhering to the ethical guidelines. I was attentive to participants during the interview process and in the analysis, with a conscious effort being made for them to feel listened to and valued. This is indicated in the richness of the data, despite the small sample size. Rigour was established by interviewing participants whose experiences were relevant to the research questions and pursuing homogeneity. When potential participants were identified, I had conversations with them about the nature of the research to ensure that the research question was relevant to their experiences. Rigour is apparent from the thoroughness of analysis, which included line by line coding, and adherence to IPA principles of reaching an interpretative level of analysis (Smith et al, 2009). I believe the quotes that I have included are most representative of the themes presented.

4.3.1.3 Transparency and coherence

The step-by-step process of IPA allows the researcher to demonstrate transparency and coherence by providing evidence of each stage of the research process (Smith et al 2009). I provided evidence of this by outlining the steps used during the IPA analytic procedure, including an annotated transcript (Appendix H), evidence of theme and cross-theme development (Appendix I & J), and by offering a reflective account of the research process (Appendix A). Independent audits were conducted with another researcher and my supervisor to ensure some

coherence in the analysis. I have endeavoured to present a coherent account of the findings.

4.3.1.4 Impact and importance

The final principle is impact and importance of the research. Here, Smith (2009) considers whether the research offers the reader something that is “interesting, important or useful” (p 183). I fulfilled this principle by firstly selecting a topic that is under-researched, with the aim of contributing to the understanding of females’ experiences of gang involvement. The young women who were interviewed provided insightful descriptions of their experiences, which I have strived to capture within an analysis that is interesting, important and useful for clinical psychologists working with females at risk of, or with experiences of gang involvement. I will provide further evidence of the importance and potential impact of conducting this research when I discuss the clinical implications.

4.3.2 Methodological limitations

A limitation of this research is the small sample size. Although it fits with Smith’s (2009) recommendations for a professional doctorate study, one might argue that a larger sample size would offer a broader insight into female gang involvement. There were a number of challenges in accessing gang-involved females, which is consistent with experiences of previous researchers (Young et al, 2007). The first challenge links to the definition of gangs. Some young women who might be perceived by others as gang involved may not identify themselves in this way. Other researchers have discussed contentions around the term ‘gang’ and have experienced similar difficulties identifying participants for their research. For example, Young et al (2007) extended their criteria to ‘group offending’. There is a risk of further perpetuating ‘gang talk’ (Hallsworth & Young, 2008) by using this type of language and for this reason it felt important to go beyond journalistic accounts of gangs (Aldridge et al, 2008) by exploring the young women’s perspectives. Firmin (2011) points out that in order to understand the experiences of females, we must use a language that is relevant to the females that we are attempting to engage with. It was for this reason that I had conversations with the

young women who were identified by the organisations, to further understand if their experiences fitted with the research question. The research sought homogeneity, and the participants were similar in many ways. Although levels of gang involvement were noticeably different, the themes tell a similar story.

Although it is beneficial that the females all felt motivated to share their experiences, to enable a better understanding of female gang involvement, this is a particular sample as other gang involved females may not be as willing to talk and may have different understandings of their experiences. Their honesty and openness demonstrates a willingness to talk, perhaps because of the support they have received from the services they are part of. Individuals who have not received support may say very different things. Furthermore, the young women were all articulate and reflective, in describing their experiences. This may not be a true representation of all females involved in gangs and it is likely that many young women feel unable to talk about their experience, and as a result continue to be silenced, particularly for such a stigmatised subject. This research does not claim to be generalisable to all females with experiences of gang involvement.

Finally, experiences around race, ethnicity and culture were not explored within the current research, as participants did not explicitly refer to this when making sense of their experiences of gang involvement. This research was led by the participants and therefore endeavored to avoid imposing assumptions about the delineation of gangs. However, including specific questions about race, ethnicity and culture in the interview schedule may have opened up conversations about this. Although it is difficult to determine whether this relates to a limitation of the research, it may be that the participants felt unable to raise these issues due to differences in the race, ethnicity and culture of the participants and the researcher (see section 4.4.1).

4.4 Implications and Recommendations

4.4.1 Implications for clinical practice

4.4.1.1 Individual level

The current research challenges the deficit model, which pathologises people and assumes that they are maladaptive in some way, while overlooking their context. A strength-based model, such as Narrative Therapy (White & Epston, 1990), would encourage clinicians to consider a person's full story and aspects of their identity that are often overshadowed. Narrative Therapy (White & Epston, 1990) fits within a social constructionist framework as it seeks to explore the language used and the stories that are told to describe people, while recognising that often more power is given to problem saturated stories. Within intervention the dominant stories of female gang members would be explored and alternative stories would be identified and thickened. This approach also attends to power by exploring how people resist and respond to oppression. It would also be useful for services to provide an opportunity for young women to critically reflect on their positions in the world, which appears to be restricted within the context of a gang. Professionals could support young women in making sense of their lives, which may enable them to recognise that things can be different. A critically informed approach could arguably be more effective and have wider implications, not only for the individual but also for society (Southall, 2011).

The current research is critical realist in nature as it attends to genuine and real experiences of distress and adversity, which were found to influence the females within the current research to become involved in gangs. The females identified experiences of abuse and trauma in their early lives and during gang involvement. They reflected on how even after leaving the gang, there is a constant awareness of having to protect oneself (and others) due to experiences of being threatened, coupled with experiences of isolation from having to dissolve relationships and move area for safety reasons. This suggests that both prevention and intervention are necessary. The findings offer practical solutions that gang involved females or females at risk of gang involvement may benefit from. It appears that one of the

reasons females become involved and re-involved in gangs is to financially support themselves and others. Therefore, support with finances and housing may help to prevent involvement. The research also suggests that interventions could be offered at 'turning points', such as domestic violence support for pregnant woman and new mothers.

4.4.1.2 Systemic level

The current research highlights the role of systemic factors in female gang involvement, which suggests that it is fundamental to involve different levels of the system within the intervention, where possible. This can occur at an immediate level by involving partners, family members, and people within the gang. While the current research attempts to move away from placing blame on families, the findings suggest that experiences within a family can influence or protect a person from becoming gang involved. This relates to gang involvement existing within the family and/or a lack of physical, emotional or financial protection from caregivers. This suggests that family work could be beneficial in preventing females from becoming involved or re-involved, or could support them in exiting the gang. To avoid placing blame on the family, contextual psychological theories and models could be used within the formulation and intervention. For example, Carter and McGoldricks Family Life Cycle (1988), Bronfenbrenners Ecological Systems Model (1992) and CMM (Pearce & Cronen 1980).

The females also described difficult relationships with their partners, including experiences of violence and betrayal. Couples work could be offered if relationships are on going, with the aim of reducing these harmful experiences. Furthermore, preventative work at a systemic level could be targeted at exploring and challenging sexist attitudes towards females in both men and women. For example, a programme could be developed and rolled out within gang-affected schools. This would need to be delivered in a way that young people feel motivated to participate in. For example, being delivered by young adults from the respective communities.

Finally, the gang itself was found to play a central role within these young women's lives and the themes that arose are likely to be similar for others within the gang. Group interventions could be developed, which target the whole gang in supporting them to find alternative, safe and creative ways of being. Perhaps consulting with gang-affected individuals would be the most effective way of developing an appropriate intervention and identifying effective ways of engagement. As mentioned, the participants in the current study felt motivated to share their experiences with the hope of sharing their perspectives. Perhaps programmes could be developed and led by 'experts by experience', as this may facilitate honest conversations, while offering positive and relatable role models for young people. This idea will be further explored in section 4.4.1.3 when considering a community psychology approach.

The current findings suggest that interventions also need to take place at a wider societal level. This research provides a contextual understanding of female gang involvement, which takes into account the intersection of marginalisation across gender and class, and experiences of economic and political marginalisation that exists within our society. Furthermore, gang involvement appears to be a way of responding to experiences of disaffection, community violence and misogyny, and these wider issues become re-enacted, and escalate, within the context of a gang. However, media discourses continue to overlook the wider issues and place blame on individuals. The impact of societal attitudes was raised within the current research, as the young women spoke about feeling isolated from systems that may be able to support them. This suggests that change needs to occur at a wider level so that young women are better supported in more appropriate ways. At a political level, while there has been some acknowledgement of female gang members, policies continue to place more importance on males. More attention needs to be given to prevent females from falling through the gaps, thereby potentially exacerbating their situations and increasing their risk.

4.4.1.3 Service level

There are a number of issues in regards to service provision and ways of working with gang-involved females. The challenges in recruitment highlighted a major

issue around service provision. The majority of the organisations that were contacted for recruitment purposes explained that females did not attend, despite some of these being open to males and females. There was a recurring view that few females engage in gang activity and when they do, they are not as involved as males. However, the results from this study convey a different picture. The participants spoke about their own experiences of gang involvement, and other females' experiences, which suggests that there are in fact many young women who are involved in gangs. A large proportion of females appear to be unsupported by services as currently, within London, there is only a small network of services developed specifically for females. Furthermore, it could be argued that because females are viewed as less concerning than males in terms of offending rates and the risk they pose, there is less investment in services specifically for females. However, this rationale overlooks the risks and vulnerabilities that females face. Therefore, gang-involved females are largely hidden in our communities. As a result, a barrier has been created which prevents them from moving on and being able to create the lives they want for themselves.

There is a lack of knowledge about how to best respond to females involved in the criminal justice system. However, evidence does suggest that females respond better to different interventions than males (XLP, 2013), perhaps due to the different gender roles and experiences of gang involvement. However, there are a lack of interventions that have been developed specifically for females who offend (XLP, 2013). Although it could be argued that females are more likely to be referred to mental health services, there are a number of reasons to suggest that females with experiences of gang involvement would not engage with these services. These reasons may be consistent with the challenges faced in recruitment. There appears to be a fear of 'snitching', due to the consequences associated with this, which could prevent people from seeking help. Furthermore, current responses are often too simplistic and are often based on discourses around being either 'sad, mad or bad', which suggests that if you are sad or mad you need treatment, but if you are bad you need punishment (Brown, 2011). The current research demonstrates the complexities of both the experiences and presentations of the females. For example, these young women could be viewed

as bad because of the criminal activity they were involved in, seen as mad because they were distressed and seen as damaged because they were violated. Responses need to capture these complexities, as opposed to making assumptions about how to work with this group.

This research highlights that we cannot make assumptions about the experiences of gang-involved females therefore we cannot assume what support is appropriate for them. In line with a community psychology approach (Orford, 1992), young women could be involved in developing a service that can appropriately meet their needs, by addressing the issues that they refer to. This would be a way of working alongside young women in a creative way that could be sustaining for them.

4.4.2 Implications for future research

Female gang involvement continues to be under-researched and because the current research is not generalisable, more research needs to be carried out to better understand females' experiences. This research is specific to females living in London and some of their experiences may be reflective of living in this particular city, therefore similar research could be conducted across different cities, to better understand females' experiences of gang involvement across the UK. As mentioned, a potential limitation of this research is the lack of understanding around the potential impact of race, ethnicity and culture on gang involvement. Future research could go beyond the current research by specifically exploring the impact of race, ethnicity and culture across different ethnic groups to better understand experiences of gang involvement from diverse female perspectives.

Gendered experiences were found to occur, particularly in relation sexism, which appear to be particularly pronounced within the gang. Future research could explore females' experiences of sexism in more depth. In relation to this, a discourse analysis could be carried out to explore the impact of media and society discourses on young people's views and ideas as these appeared to be present within the participants' language and descriptions. Perhaps a comparative study, which explores the views of females and males, would allow this to be better

understood. Furthermore, this could inform interventions by suggesting ways to address these issues. It would also be interesting to further explore female's experiences of relationships as these appeared to influence the young women to join a gang, and within the gang their intimate relationships were complex. Future research could also extend on the current research by exploring females' experiences of services, their perspectives on what works and what doesn't work, and whether there are specific barriers to accessing services. In line with a community psychology approach (Orford, 1992), this research could inform the development of appropriate and relevant services for gang-involved females.

4.5 Personal Reflections

4.5.1 Reflexivity

Keeping a reflexive diary enabled me to maintain a reflexive position, by recording observations, thoughts and feelings that arose throughout this process (Appendix A). I align myself within a critical realist – social constructionist position, and therefore believe that problems do not reside within the individual but rather the wider context, which encourages me to maintain a non-pathologising and non-judgemental stance. One of the reasons that led me to carry out this research is the existing problematising and blaming discourse that describes marginalised young people, and particularly those who are gang involved. I was aware that by challenging this discourse, I was at risk of overlooking the violence and harm that gang activity often promotes. Another reason for carrying out this research was the marginalisation of females within this context, and from a feminist viewpoint, it felt important to enable female's voices to be heard. From the participants' accounts, their parents have been described as rejecting and abusive, and males have been described as violent and controlling. As a critical realist – social constructionist, I did not want to place the blame on families or males, as I recognise their own experiences of oppression. However, I also did not want to minimise the participants' experiences of abuse within their relationships. It was important for the participants' experiences to be portrayed through the research, and my interpretation has allowed me to draw upon psychological and sociological theories

to consider their experiences further. During the stages of analysis, I approached the data as a psychologist and from an IPA lense. At times, I found it challenging to find a balance between interpreting what the participants were conveying and bringing my own experiences and understandings as a psychologist. While at times it felt as though I was being less interpretive and therefore moving away from the methodologies, particularly because the participants were articulate and reflective when conveying their experiences, there was also times when I was perhaps becoming too interpretive. It was useful to consult with my supervisor when these dilemmas arose.

I experienced considerable difficulties with recruitment and at times I wondered whether I had taken on a research area that was too ambitious. However, when I had the opportunity to speak to these four young women about their experiences I was continually struck by their strength and determination. They all reflected on feeling misunderstood by society due to their voices remaining unheard. This reminded me of the importance of this research and has motivated me to carry out research in the future, which encourages the voices of marginalised young people to be heard.

It was important for me to consider the similarities and differences between the participants and me. Being a female was bound to have impacted on the interviews in different ways. The females all reflected on difficult relationships with males, some of which were characterised by violence and betrayal. Had I been a male researcher, these experiences may not have been spoken about. However, being female may have led the females to directly compare themselves to me, which may have impacted on what they shared. I reflected on my own process of comparing my life experiences to the participants in my reflexive diary (Appendix A). As mentioned, race and ethnicity were rarely raised in the interviews. I wondered whether being white, and being perceived as a white middle-class professional, meant that the participants felt unable to raise these issues. The theme of race was raised with Chloe; the only white participant. She spoke about how she found it difficult to stay out of gang involvement because of the beliefs people held about her as an ex gang member. She reflected on how this was even more salient for

her black peers as they experienced an intersection of discrimination, with the stigma of being a gang member but also the stigma of being black. Race and ethnicity did not develop into a theme as it was not often raised in the other interviews. Perhaps Chloe felt able to honestly reflect on this issue because we were both white individuals. The only other time that race was discussed was when Violet referred to someone as a “white bitch”, after which she quickly apologised for making this remark, which suggested she was aware of our difference in race. Had I been in a therapeutic session, I would have explored this further, however, the participant chose not to reflect more on race when making sense of her experiences.

4.6 Final Thoughts

This research offers a genuine and detailed insight into female’s experiences, while drawing upon psychological and sociological theories to understand this further. While this study does not endeavour to be generalised to all females with experiences of gang involvement, it highlights the experiences of the four young women who participated in this research. All of the participants spoke about the importance of the current research and stressed the need for their voices being heard to allow female gang involvement to be better understood, as opposed to outsiders making assumptions about female experiences of gang involvement.

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6.0 APPENDICES

Appendix A: Reflexive Journal

Appendix B: Participant Information Sheet

Appendix C: Participant Consent Form

Appendix D: Research Poster

Appendix E: Interview Schedule

Appendix F: University of East London Ethical Approval

Appendix G: University of East London Ethical Amendments Approval

Appendix H: Appendix H: Extract from transcript showing initial noting and emerging themes (Violet)

Appendix I: Theme development for an individual participant

Appendix J: Cross-theme development

Appendix A: Reflexive Journal

May 2015

I went to see the film, 'The Honeytrap' at The Ritzy cinema in Brixton last night. This film presents the story of a young woman who became involved in a gang, seemingly without meaning to. One of the reasons I was motivated to carry out this research is because of the way young women in gangs, and gang-affected young people in general (and more widely; marginalised young people), are portrayed in the media. This film offered a genuine insight into the experiences of a young woman who inadvertently became involved in a gang while she was searching for intimacy and acceptance. I was extremely moved by the film and this feeling seemed to be shared by the audience. I experienced a genuine sense of sadness for the young man who lost his life, and his family, and also for the young woman who was involved in his death. It felt particularly raw because this had happened in Brixton and I wondered if some of the people in the room had been directly affected by the story that was being told. When I got home, I began to read some newspaper articles about the case. I found these to be heavily blaming of the young woman, which frustrated me after being witness to some of her story, which highlighted experiences of abuse and manipulation. I also read about the young man who was killed and I thought about the impact this must have had on his family. I imagined if this had been one of my relatives or friends. Thinking about this story from different perspectives raised an issue for me that I have often grappled with. While I disagree with the blame placed on the young woman, I do not want to overlook or minimise the severity of what happened and the fact that someone was killed. Similarly, as I was watching the film, I felt anger towards the boyfriend of this young woman. He was powerful, controlling and abusive, but again, I wondered about his own context. This reminded me of the wider issues that I need to continue to hold in mind when carrying out this research. There's often a tendency to place the blame on an individual, rather than taking a step back and thinking about what's really going on for them to do such things.

April 2016

I have just met with Natasha and feel inspired by her story. It was as though she took me on a journey as she vividly described her experiences. I was struck by her openness and honesty about sensitive and personal experiences. Perhaps I made assumptions about what aspects of my own personal life I would be comfortable sharing (or not sharing).

Natasha said two phrases that have really stuck with me; “don’t suffer in silence” and “every cloud has a silver lining”. The first phrase resonated with me as one of the reasons I was motivated to carry out this research was that female’s voices appear to be silenced when it comes to gang involvement. I wondered what it was that helped her not to suffer in silence and whether this might be similar or different for other females with similar experiences. The second phrase is one that I have used before in my personal life, when coming to terms with difficult experiences. While I related to this, it was important for me to explore Natasha’s meaning of this and not to impose my own assumptions. Natasha identified becoming a mother as a ‘silver lining’ of gang involvement. She describes this as a turning point for her, as now her daughter is her priority. I wonder what gave her the strength and determination to be the best mother she can be. I began to reflect back to being 17 and how different our experiences were. I also thought about the assumptions that society often makes in regards to teenage pregnancies, and questioned my own assumptions here. I wondered whether I would have felt concerned about the responsibilities she was being faced with, in addition to the lack of support she was receiving, her involvement in gangs, and her experiences of violence from her partner, as potential sources of threat to her and her daughter. Exploring Natasha’s experiences of being a mum allowed her story, without the assumption of others being imposed.

Appendix B: Participant Information Sheet

UNIVERSITY OF EAST LONDON



University of East London
School of Psychology
Stratford Campus
Water Lane
London E15 4LZ

The Principal Investigator

Rachel Couper
Email: u1331790@uel.ac.uk

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

The purpose of this letter is to provide you with the information that you need to consider in deciding whether to participate in this research study. The study is being conducted as part of my professional doctorate in Clinical Psychology at the University of East London.

Project Title

How do females make sense of their experiences of being involved in gang activity?

Project Description

The aim of the research is to hear about experiences of gang involvement from a female perspective, as very little is known about this at the moment. The research will be written up in the form of an academic thesis and the researcher might develop this into an article that is submitted for publication. Hopefully this research will help organisations to support females who have had past or present experiences of gang involvement.

The research involves individual interviews with females at [organisation name], talking about their experiences of direct or indirect involvement with gang activity. Interviews will usually last around an hour. I would like the interviews to be led by the participants. It would be interesting to hear about your journey into gang activity and some of the positive and negative aspects of being associated with a gang.

Some people might get upset during interviews if they talk about something difficult or emotional. If this happens, I can get in touch with someone at [organisation name], who you feel comfortable talking to or I can provide details of other organisations that offer support. You have the option to break at any time during the interview or we can arrange to finish it at another time if you prefer.

Is it private?

I will record all of the interviews on a digital voice recorder so I can remember what we talked about. I will be the only person who will listen to the recording and I will type it up into a transcript. If you mention any names, including yours, and if you say some information that someone could identify you from, it will be changed (anonymised) in the typed version. This typed transcript may be read by my supervisor at the University of East London and the examiners who test me when I hand the research in to be marked. There is also a possibility that someone from [organisation name], will read this, but only if you give permission. No one else will be able to read the transcript. The audio file and transcript will be saved on a computer that is password protected, to make sure no one else sees or hears them and after the examination, I will delete these recordings. The written transcript will be kept as a computer file for three years and might be used to write the research up into an article to be published in a psychology journal.

The final write-up will include some quotes from the interviews I have done. The thesis will be shared with the staff at [organisation name], and people who were interviewed, so there is a chance that someone who was interviewed or who works at [organisation name], and knows you might know it was you from what you said. I will make a conscious effort to prevent this from happening, by making sure any of the comments from interviews that I include in the final write-up are altered so that they are not identifiable.

The only time that I would need to share what we talked about with someone else is if involvement in criminal activity is on-going or in the past and you or another person is believed to be at significant risk harm. I would tell someone at [organisation name], who you are familiar with, in the first instance. I would do my best to tell you first if I needed to pass this information on.

Location

Interviews will take place at the [organisation name] premises.

And remember....

You don't have to take part in this study and should not feel that you have to. If you decide to be interviewed, you are able to take a break during the interview, finish it at another time, or withdraw at any time, even after you have finished your interview, and you don't have to say why. If you do pull out, the content of your interview will not be included in the write up, and your relationship with [organisation name], and the people there won't be affected at all.

Please feel free to ask me any questions. If you are happy to go ahead you will be asked to sign a consent form before your interview. Please keep this letter for reference

If you have any questions or concerns about how the study has been conducted, please contact the study's supervisor [Name, School of Psychology, University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ. Telephone. Email address]

Or

Chair of the School of Psychology Research Ethics Sub-committee: Dr. Mark Finn,
School of Psychology, University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ.
(Tel: 020 8223 4493. Email: m.finn@uel.ac.uk)

Thank you!

Yours sincerely,
Rachel Couper

Appendix C: Participant Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF EAST LONDON



**Consent to participate in a
research study**

How do females make sense of their experiences of being involved in gang activity?

I have read the information sheet relating to the above research study and have been given a copy to keep. The nature and purposes of the research have been explained to me, and I have had the opportunity to discuss the details and ask questions about this information. I understand what is being proposed and the procedures in which I will be involved have been explained to me.

I understand that my involvement in this study, and particular data from this research, will remain strictly confidential except if involvement in criminal activity is on-going or in the past and you or another person is believed to be at significant risk harm. I would tell someone at [organisation name], who you are familiar with, in the first instance. I would do my best to tell you first if I needed to pass this information on.

. Only the researcher involved in the study will have access to identifying data. It has been explained to me what will happen once the research study has been completed.

I hereby freely and fully consent to participate in the study, which has been fully explained to me. Having given this consent I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without disadvantage to myself and without being obliged to give any reason.

Participant's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

.....

Participant's Signature

.....

Researcher's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

.....

Researcher's Signature

.....

Date:

IF YOU ARE FEMALE & HAVE EXPERIENCES OF GANG ACTIVITY I'D LIKE TO SPEAK WITH YOU!

What is the reason for this research?

- ❖ Very little is known about female's experiences of gang involvement
- ❖ Current perceptions from the media & society are blaming and individualistic

I want to hear about why people get involved in gang activity in the first place, what it is like to be involved in a gang & what can help people to leave a gang.

This research aims to:

- ❖ Hear from young women themselves
- +
- ❖ Help organisations to support young women who have had past or present experiences of gang involvement

What will it involve?

- ❖ One hour confidential interview with young women who have been involved in gangs
- ❖ Interviews will be led by you – you can decide what you feel comfortable talking about

YOU WILL RECEIVE A £20 VOUCHER OF YOUR CHOICE AS A THANK YOU.

IF YOU ARE INTERESTED IN GETTING INVOLVED, PLEASE CONTACT:

RACHEL COUPER – [CONTACT DETAILS]

Appendix E: Interview Schedule

In what ways were you involved? Who did you know (not asking for their names)? What did you do with gang members?

Tell me about your experiences of being involved in gang activity

How did your involvement in gang activity come about?

Did/do other people know you were associated? What did/do they think about that?

What were your relationships like with other people in the gang?

What did you find were some of the positive aspects of being involved in gang activity? Did you gain anything?

What did you find were some of the negative aspects of being involved in gang activity?

What has it taught you? Has it influenced your ideas about your future?

How did it feel to be associated with a gang?

Did/does it influence how you see yourself or describe yourself? Has it changed you in any way?

Is there anything getting in your way of no longer being involved?

Is there anything you miss about being involved with a gang?

Tell me about whether anything in particular helped you to move out of being involved in gang activity

Is there anything else you'd like to say about being involved in a gang?

Appendix F: University of East London Ethical Approval

NOTICE OF ETHICS REVIEW DECISION

For research involving human participants

BSc/MSc/MA/Professional Doctorates in Clinical, Counselling and Educational Psychology

SUPERVISOR: Neil Rees

REVIEWER: Fevronia Christodoulidi

STUDENT: Rachel Couper

Title of proposed study: How do females make sense of their experience of being involved in gang activity?

Course: Professional Doctorate in Clinical Psychology (DClinPsy).

DECISION (*Delete as necessary*):

***APPROVED, BUT MINOR CONDITIONS ARE REQUIRED BEFORE THE RESEARCH COMMENCES**

APPROVED: Ethics approval for the above named research study has been granted from the date of approval (see end of this notice) to the date it is submitted for assessment/examination.

APPROVED, BUT MINOR AMENDMENTS ARE REQUIRED BEFORE THE RESEARCH COMMENCES (see Minor Amendments box below): In this circumstance, re-submission of an ethics application is not required but the student must confirm with their supervisor that all minor amendments have been made before the research commences. Students are to do this by filling in the confirmation box below when all amendments have been attended to and emailing a copy of this decision notice to her/his supervisor for their records. The supervisor will then forward the student's confirmation to the School for its records.

NOT APPROVED, MAJOR AMENDMENTS AND RE-SUBMISSION REQUIRED (see Major Amendments box below): In this circumstance, a revised ethics application must be submitted and approved before any research takes place. The revised application will be reviewed by the same reviewer. If in doubt, students should ask their supervisor for support in revising their ethics application.

Minor amendments required (for reviewer):

Under 3.4 in the Ethics form, the student states that *“Given the nature of the service, there is a chance that young people may disclose criminal or anti-social activity. Participants will be informed at the start of the interview that this is not encouraged/not the purpose of the research”*. Also, under 3.5, the student states that *“However, if the involvement in criminal activity is on-going or in the past and the interviewee or another individual was believed to be at significant risk harm, this would need to be reported, to the field supervisor in the first instance. Anonymity cannot be guaranteed and this will be clearly outlined to the participants prior to interviews being carried out. Discussions have taken place with Urban Academy regarding their policy on confidentiality and their specific procedures will be adopted in this instance.”*

I think that this shall be clearly stated in the ‘participant’s consent form’ so that the researcher has ‘signed evidence’ of the participant’s understanding of that, rather than this coming following a verbal explanation alone.

Major amendments required (for reviewer):

Confirmation of making the above minor amendments (for students):

I have noted and made all the required minor amendments, as stated above, before starting my research and collecting data.

Student’s name Rachel Couper
Student number: 1331790

Date: 23rd April 2015

ASSESSMENT OF RISK TO RESEACHER (for reviewer)

If the proposed research could expose the researcher to any of kind of emotional, physical or health and safety hazard? Please rate the degree of risk:

- HIGH
- MEDIUM
- LOW

Reviewer comments in relation to researcher risk (if any):

Reviewer (*Typed name to act as signature*): Dr. Fevronia Christodoulidi

Date: 20.4.2015

This reviewer has assessed the ethics application for the named research study on behalf of the School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee (moderator of School ethics approvals)

PLEASE NOTE:

*For the researcher and participants involved in the above named study to be covered by UEL's insurance and indemnity policy, prior ethics approval from the School of Psychology (acting on behalf of the UEL Research Ethics Committee), and confirmation from students where minor amendments were required, must be obtained before any research takes place.

*For the researcher and participants involved in the above named study to be covered by UEL's insurance and indemnity policy, travel approval from UEL (not the School of Psychology) must be gained if a researcher intends to travel overseas to collect data, even if this involves the researcher travelling to his/her home country to conduct the research. Application details can be found here: <http://www.uel.ac.uk/gradschool/ethics/fieldwork/>

Appendix G: University of East London Ethical Amendments Approval

UNIVERSITY OF EAST LONDON School of Psychology

REQUEST FOR AMENDMENT TO AN ETHICS APPLICATION

FOR BSc, MSc/MA & TAUGHT PROFESSIONAL DOCTORATE STUDENTS

Please complete this form if you are requesting approval for proposed amendment(s) to an ethics application that has been approved by the School of Psychology.

Note that approval must be given for significant change to research procedure that impacts on ethical protocol. If you are not sure about whether your proposed amendment warrants approval consult your supervisor or contact Dr Mark Finn (Chair of the School Research Ethics Committee).

HOW TO COMPLETE & SUBMIT THE REQUEST

1. Complete the request form electronically and accurately.
2. Type your name in the 'student's signature' section (page 2).
3. When submitting this request form, ensure that all necessary documents are attached (see below).
4. Using your UEL email address, email the completed request form along with associated documents to: Dr Mark Finn at m.finn@uel.ac.uk
5. Your request form will be returned to you via your UEL email address with reviewer's response box completed. This will normally be within five days. Keep a copy of the approval to submit with your project/dissertation/thesis.
6. Recruitment and data collection are **not** to commence until your proposed amendment has been approved.

REQUIRED DOCUMENTS

1. A copy of your previously approved ethics application with proposed amendments(s) added as tracked changes.
2. Copies of updated documents that may relate to your proposed amendment(s). For example an updated recruitment notice, updated participant information letter, updated consent form etc.
3. A copy of the approval of your initial ethics application

Name of applicant:	Rachel Couper
Programme of study:	Doctorate in Clinical Psychology
Title of research:	How do females make sense of their experience of being involved in gang activity?
Name of supervisor:	Neil Rees

Briefly outline the nature of your proposed amendment(s) and associated rationale(s) in the boxes below

Proposed amendment	Rationale
To provide a £20 voucher to participants.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I am recruiting with my colleague, Emma Agnew, who is also interviewing people who have been involved in gang activity and she is offering a £20 voucher to participants (males who have been involved in gang activity). It seems only fair to offer the equivalent to my participants (females). 2. It has been difficult to speak to this client group so far so hopefully offering a voucher will provide an incentive. The organisations that I have been in touch with have suggested that a voucher might be an incentive for the young people.
To recruit from third sector London based organisations and/or youth offending teams.	Previously I stated that I would be recruiting from [organisation name] but this is no longer possible due to the recent closure.

Please tick	YES	NO
Is your supervisor aware of your proposed amendment(s) and agree to them?	✓	

Student's signature (please type your name): Rachel Couper

Date: 10th September 2015

TO BE COMPLETED BY REVIEWER		
Amendment(s) approved	YES	
Comments		

Reviewer:

Date:

Appendix H: Extract from transcript showing initial noting and emerging themes (Violet)

THOUGHTS.

NOTES.

338 involvement in criminal activity know what I'm saying? That's how
 339 seems to be less they do it but for girls it's not really
 340 severe for females like that, it's not that deep.
 341 - diff expectations?

gender differences.

342 making a name Interviewer: It sounds different for
 343 for yourself => respect. males and females...

344
 345 having to be assertive & resisting Violet: And because I already had a
 346 peer pressure. name for myself they already knew if
 347 knowing own I want to do something, I'm gonna do
 348 boundaries & something. If I can help, I will help
 349 making own but I'm not gonna be walking around
 350 choices shooting or stabbing nobody. It's just

EARNED RESPECT.

351 weighing up consequences proper not happening. Maybe I might
 352 be involved in a little rushing. If that's

knowing own boundaries.

353 being in the moment happening right there in that second
 354 (adrenaline) in front of me, then maybe but other
 355 gender roles & than that it's not...For girls it's
 356 different types different, like, you get different types
 357 of females. of girls 'init

being 'in the moment'

gender roles - diff types of females.

358
 359 Interviewer: Yeah so do you think
 360 they maybe they had some respect
 361 for you in that they knew you weren't
 362 going to do certain things?

363
 364 hierarchies & roles in the gang. Violet: Yeah, literally. There's levels
 365 Men hold the to this. So if you're someone's
 366 power. girlfriend then they respect you

MATS AS POWERFUL / SUPERIOR TO FEMALES

367 having a boyfriend differently but if you're not you're
 368 in the gang => treated like someone's slag. There's
 369 earned respect. different girls, some will have sex
 370 derogatory new with everyone, there's girls that will
 371 to words females. go out teething for the boys, there's

HAVING A BOYFRIEND IN THE GANG MEANS YOU ARE RESPECTED. DIFFERENT MATS OF FEMALES.

372 Realisation that
373 she did favours
374 for males.

375
376 in it together -
377 looking after
378 each other in
a sense.

379 importance of
380 need.
381 Her importance /
382 love within the
383 gang - as if they
384 needed her.

385 Thinking about
386 the future (prison).

387 fitting with gender
388 expectations -
389 wanting to
390 earn approval
391 from boyfriend

392
393
394

395
396 witnessing other
397 people's failures
398 & learning from
399 their mistakes.
400 - prison as a
common path

401
402

403 original &
404 founding member.
405 "this thing" - doesn't
call it a gang).
returning to
gang involvement

girls that will line up for the boys, like
and to be honest I was probably one
of them. I'd line up some people, but
only for weed or something if there
was a drought in our group I'll be
like, okay cool, we need to do
something else, we need to smoke
some weed, but other than that I'd
be like... I was like more of the brains
of the operation and I'll let everyone
else do it, do you get what I'm
saying? I'm not getting my hands
dirty to get nicked, no it's not
happening. Any my boyfriends sitting
right there as well (laughs). It's not
happening.

Interviewer: It sounds like you were
quite aware that you didn't want to
get yourself into too much trouble
because you might end up getting
arrested?

Violet: Yeah. Because I knew from
when I was there the first time that
half the people that I was in it have
gone to jail. Do you get what I'm
saying?

Interviewer: Yeah

Violet: So we started this thing
together a couple of years ago and
I've come back a couple of years

FEMALES HELP MALES
OUT

IN IT TOGETHER

DRUG TAKING IN THE
GANG (FUNCTION).

THINKING ABOUT
FUTURE & AVOIDING
PRISON.

FITTING TO GENDER
EXPECTATIONS

THINKING ABOUT
FUTURE & LEARNING
FROM PEOPLE'S
MISTAKES

RETURNING TO GANG
INVOLVEMENT.

change to 'family' ^{relates to own family (stepmother)}

406 sense of betrayal later and half the friends I had are
407 that there are gone and you lot are have got all
408 new members who she didn't these new friends. The reason you
409 approve. got all these new friends is because
410 all of the old friends are in jail. You're
411 learning from their trying to tell me that I should do what
412 & avoiding their my old friends did...no no no no.
413 mistakes. This is what we're gonna do....we're
414 anger towards gonna do the plan together and then
415 new members. we're gonna make the new friends
416 setting them up. do it because I'm not involved, I'm
417 they haven't earned proper not involved like. But I don't
418 we must. chat to them no more and that's why
419 consequences of they want to beat me up.
420 learning - Threats
421 of violence.
422 ? Betrayal.
423
424
425
426
427 Violet: Yeah
428
429
430 Interviewer: You said you lost touch
431 with some people?

UNCOMFORTABLE WITH CHANGES TO 'FAMILY' - sense of betrayal.

LEARNING FROM OTHER PEOPLE'S MISTAKES.

CHALLENGES OF LEAVING GANG DUE TO THREATS OF VIOLENCE.

432 gender expectations Violet: Eventually I did because
433 from society. people were like; no, you're a girl,
434 lack of unreal standards you're not meant to be doing these
435 from society. type of things. But it's hard because
436 comparing self to not everybody understands that not
437 others who have an easy life/ everyone lives at home, do you get
438 supportive environment what I'm saying? Everyone lives at
439 role of mother - home where their mum's going to
to look after children (lack of this in own relationship).

GENDER EXPECTATIONS FROM SOCIETY.

LACK OF UNDERSTANDING FROM OTHERS.

OTHERS HAVING A SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT
SOCIAL CONTEXT & GANG INVOLVEMENT.

Appendix I: Theme development for an individual participant (Violet)

Codes	Emergent Themes & Sub-Ordinate Themes		Super-Ordinate Themes
Getting involved as the norm Inevitability of becoming involved Personal connection to the gangs Postcode beef Social life becoming more violent Competition between people leading to conflict	Growing up around gangs		GETTING INVOLVED – CIRCLE OF LIFE
Difficult to recall –blurred process Unintentionally becoming involved	Transition from being around gangs to becoming involved		
Rejection from family Physical abuse Being kicked out of home and having nowhere to go Abandonment from father Feeling like no one else loves you	Conflict in the family	Physical & Emotional protection	GETTING INVOLVED - SURVIVAL
All in the same boat: relating to each other Sense of family in the gang and lack of this outwith Feeling uncomfortable with changes to the family structure	An alternative family		
Forced to grow up Having to fend for herself Having to fend for mother and sister Not being looked after by own parents Money making	Having to fend for yourself (and others)	Financial security	

<p>Access to drugs and alcohol</p> <p>Taking drugs and alcohol as a way to cope</p> <p>Feeling unable to cope without drugs and alcohol</p> <p>Suppressing difficult emotions</p>	<p>Escapism</p>	<p>Escapism through drugs and alcohol</p>	
<p>Something to do</p> <p>Drama and risk taking</p>	<p>Peer relationships</p>		<p>BEING INVOLVED – A DOUBLE EDGED SWORD</p>
<p>Violence within the group</p> <p>Rules of when to expect violence</p> <p>Gang being out of control</p> <p>Not being able to trust people</p>	<p>Violence and betrayal in the gang</p>	<p>Ride or Die</p>	
<p>Having to chose between old and new life</p> <p>Establishing trust means making sacrifices</p>	<p>All or nothing</p>		
<p>Expectations of how a female should be</p> <p>Female as less violent</p> <p>Females as sexual objects</p> <p>Men as powerful</p>	<p>Gender expectations</p>	<p>Gender and power</p>	
<p>Boyfriend as a powerful and controlling figure</p> <p>Having to fight for her man</p>	<p>Having a boyfriend in the gang</p>		
<p>Avoidance of prison and learning from other people</p> <p>Knowing when to stop</p> <p>Expectations of how a relationship should be</p> <p>Questioning the morals of gang activity</p> <p>Sense of being better than the gang</p>	<p>Wanting a better life for yourself</p>		<p>GETTING OUT AND STAYING OUT</p>
<p>Permanence of gang identity</p> <p>Threat of physical harm after leaving the gang</p> <p>Weighing up life outwith versus life in the gang</p> <p>Homelessness</p> <p>Attempting to make a better life for herself but unintentionally reconnected through relationship (inevitability – circle of life)</p>	<p>Difficult to make a life for yourself outwith the gang</p>		

Appendix J: Cross-Theme Development

Emerging Themes	Sub-ordinate Themes	Super-ordinate Themes
Getting involved as the norm (1, 2, 3, 4) Inevitability (1, 2, 3, 4) Gang-related violence as a common occurrence (1, 2, 3, 4) Postcode Beef (1, 2, 4)	Growing up around gangs	Getting Involved – ‘Circle of Life’
Difficult to recall – ‘blurred process’ (1, 3, 4) Unintentionally becoming involved (1, 3, 4) Being viewed as a gang member (self fulfilling prophecy) (2, 3, 4)	Transition to becoming involved	
Abusive family context (1, 3, 4) Rejection from family (1, 3, 4) Protection from family (2) Searching for protection (2, 3, 4) An alternative family (1, 2, 3, 4)	Physical & emotional protection	Getting Involved - Survival
Money making (1, 2, 3, 4) Having to fend for yourself (1, 2, 3, 4) Having to fend for others (1, 2, 3, 4) Returning for financial reasons (1, 3)	Financial security	
Drug and alcohol consumption (1, 2, 3, 4) Drug and alcohol as a way of coping (1, 2, 3, 4) Suppressing emotions through drugs and alcohol (1, 3, 4)	Escapism	
Closure of youth clubs (2, 4) Something to do (1, 2, 3, 4) Drama and risk taking (1, 3)	Peer relationships	Being Involved – A Double-Edged Sword
Earning trust (1, 4) Having to make sacrifices (1, 4)	Ride or Die	
Women as less violent (1, 2, 3, 4) Violence against women (1, 3, 4) Sex as an expectation (1,2, 3, 4) Having a boyfriend in the gang (1, 2, 3, 4)	Gender and power	
Being given a second chance (4) Permission to leave (1) Becoming a mum (3, 4) Witnessing the outcome for others (prison and death) (1, 2, 3, 4)	Wanting a better life for yourself	Getting Out & Staying Out
On going threats (1, 3, 4) Being viewed in a narrow way by others (1, 2, 3, 4)	Permanence of gang activity	