

**“VICTIM, SURVIVOR, THRIVER”: AN EXPLORATION OF THE PERCEPTIONS AND
EXPERIENCES OF FEMALES PREVIOUSLY AFFILIATED WITH GANGS**

BY

OLIVIA LOWE

A Thesis submitted to the University of Nottingham for the degree of Doctorate in Applied
Educational Psychology

May 2022

Word Count: 41'160

Abstract

The aim of the current study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of females who have previously been affiliated with gangs using semi-structured interviews and reflective thematic analysis. The research questions focused on women's experiences and perceptions related to joining the gangs, their relationships in the gang and their desistance from gang affiliation.

Numerous themes were established from the women's accounts, which highlighted the complex range of individual experiences, family and societal factors that acted to increase their risk of becoming affiliated with gangs and increased their vulnerability to adverse experiences within the gang. A range of factors that led to their desistance were explored, alongside the factors that aided them to remain unaffiliated with the gang and form a positive new identity.

The outcomes of this research have relevance to many professionals working with young women, including educationalists, law enforcement, social care, and psychologists. Implications around individual and systemic preventative and intervention support are discussed alongside implications for future research.

Dedication

This research is dedicated to the five amazing women who participated in this study for their insightful and thought-provoking accounts of their affiliation with gangs.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my fantastic University tutors, Russell and Anthea for their ongoing support, supervision, and guidance over my doctoral journey. Your unwavering support has been much appreciated and incredibly valuable at every step of this process. Thank you to all the tutor team at Nottingham for their support on my TEP journey.

Thank you to my brilliant placement supervisors, Heather, Sofia, and Stella for all their support during my thesis journey. All your support, interest and guidance has helped me to grow and develop my work into what I have created today, and I am so grateful.

I would also like to thank the incredible people in my cohort and the amazing people that I work with on placement for all their support and guidance throughout this time. It has been a delight working and sharing my experiences with so many fantastic people.

I would like to thank my family for all their support and a special thanks to my Mum for helping to proofread this mammoth piece of work!

Finally, thanks to my incredible husband, Tim, for all his support, love, and encouragement throughout this experience.

Contents

Abstract.....	2
Dedication.....	3
Acknowledgements.....	3
List of Tables.....	9
List of Figures.....	9
1. Chapter 1: Introduction.....	10
1.1 Background and Rationale of the current research.....	10
1.2 Personal and professional interest in the research area.....	11
1.3 Aims of the research.....	11
2. Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	12
2.1 Chapter overview.....	12
2.2 Defining ‘gang’ affiliation.....	12
2.2.1 The Eurogang definition (Klein et al, 2001).....	14
2.3 Theoretical insights into gang affiliation.....	16
2.3.1 Social Control Theory (Hirschi, 1969).....	16
2.3.2 Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Model (1992).....	17
2.3.3 The Unified Theory (Alleyne & Wood, 2010).....	17
2.3.4 The Adjusted Unified Theory of Gang membership (Mozova, 2017).....	21
2.4 Research exploring theoretical models of Gang affiliation.....	24
2.4.1 Affiliation with gangs.....	24
2.4.2 Desistance from gangs.....	25
2.5 Historical overview of female gang affiliation.....	26
2.6 Research on female experiences in gangs in USA.....	27
2.7 Research on female experiences in gangs in the UK.....	30
2.8 Implications of current research.....	31
2.8.1 Male dominated narrative.....	31
2.8.2 Service provision.....	32
2.9 Systematic Research synthesis.....	33
2.9.1 Introduction to systematic research synthesis.....	33
2.9.2 Defining research synthesis.....	33
2.9.3 Qualitative research synthesis.....	33
2.9.3.1 Method overview and rationale.....	33
2.9.3.2 Advantages.....	35
2.9.3.3 Methodological constraints.....	36

2.9.3.4	Review question	36
2.9.4	Synthesis Design	36
2.9.4.1	Search strategy	36
2.9.4.2	Exploratory searches	37
2.9.4.3	Systematic Database searches.....	37
2.9.4.4	Inclusion criteria	37
2.9.5	Rationale for inclusion/ exclusion criteria.....	41
2.9.5.1	Country	41
2.9.5.2	Participant sample and setting	41
2.9.5.3	Study focus	41
2.9.5.4	Research Design	42
2.9.5.5	Data presentation	42
2.9.5.6	Publication.....	42
2.9.5.7	Publication date	42
2.10	Analysis and synthesis procedure	42
2.10.1	Situating the studies.....	42
2.10.2	Included Studies Summary	43
2.10.2.1	Setting and Sample.....	46
2.10.2.2	Topic Relevant to current research.....	46
2.10.2.3	Methodology, Data collection and analysis	46
2.10.2.4	Publication	47
2.10.3	Analysis and Synthesis Procedure	47
2.10.3.1	Situating the studies	47
2.10.3.2	Identifying findings.....	48
2.10.3.3	Rigour in the findings	48
2.11	Analysis.....	54
2.11.1	Developing first order themes/codes.....	54
2.12	Synthesis	54
2.12.1	Developing second order themes	54
2.12.2	Synthesis Analysis	56
2.12.2.1	Relationships: complex and controlling	56
2.12.2.2	Female roles.....	56
2.12.2.3	Criminality: Accessories.....	57
2.12.2.4	Fear.....	57
2.12.2.5	Gang 'family'	58

2.12.2.6	Self and society	59
2.13	Interpreting findings	60
2.13.1	Developing third order interpretations	60
2.14	Overview of third order interpretation	61
2.14.1	Link to Theoretical insights	62
2.15	Appraisal	63
2.15.1	Establishing plausibility	63
2.15.2	Critiques of research synthesis	64
2.16	Rationale for the current study	65
2.16.1	Summary of current literature	65
2.16.2	Objectives and unique contribution of the current study	66
2.16.3	Research questions	68
3.	Chapter 3: Methodology	68
3.1	Introduction to Methodology	68
3.2	Research Questions	68
3.3	Methodological orientation	71
3.3.1	Ontology	71
3.3.1.1	Realism	71
3.3.1.2	Critical Realism	71
3.3.1.3	Relativism	71
3.3.1.4	(Post) positivism	72
3.3.1.5	Ontological position in this research	72
3.3.2	Epistemology: Theories of Knowledge	72
3.3.2.1	Contextualism	73
3.3.2.2	Pragmatism	73
3.3.2.3	Constructionism	73
3.3.2.4	Transformative	74
3.3.2.5	Epistemological stance within the current study	75
3.3.3	Qualitative research	76
3.4	Thematic Analysis	79
3.4.1	Thematic analysis approach within the current study	80
3.5	Data generation methods	81
3.5.1	Interviews	81
3.5.2	Semi structured interviews	82
3.5.3	Focus groups	82

3.5.4 Survey	83
3.5.5 Current data generation method	83
3.6. Recruitment, participant selection and contextual information	84
3.6.1 Recruitment.....	84
3.6.1.1 Final sample.....	86
3.6.2 Participant sampling criteria.....	86
3.6.3 Semi structured narrative interviews.....	87
3.6.3.1 Developing the interview schedule.....	88
3.6.3.2 Narrative tools	89
3.6.3.3 Fieldwork testing.....	90
3.7 Data collection Procedure: methods and tools.....	90
3.7.1 Interview procedure	90
3.7.2 Method of analysis.....	92
3.7.2.1 Transcription	92
3.8 Reflexive Thematic analysis	92
3.8.1 The process of reflexive thematic analysis	93
3.9 Ensuring good quality Reflexive thematic analysis.....	97
3.10 Trustworthiness and dependability of the data for qualitative research.....	100
3.11 Reflexivity	103
3.12 Ethical considerations	104
3.12.1 Informed consent	104
3.12.2 Confidentiality.....	105
3.12.3 Risk of harm to participants	105
3.12.4 Right to withdraw	107
3.13 Summary.....	107
4. Chapter 4: Analysis.....	107
4.1 Chapter overview	107
4.2 Overview of themes	108
4.3 Themes linking to perceptions and experiences of joining gangs.....	113
4.3.1 Theme 1: Challenging home/life experiences.	113
4.3.2 Theme 2: Seeking belonging and affection.	116
4.3.3 Theme 3 Aspirational lifestyle	119
4.4 Themes linking to perceptions and experiences of relationships in gangs	122
4.4.1 Theme 4: Gender and power.	122
4.4.1.1 Stereotypical female characteristics being linked to reduced power and status	

4.4.1.2 Sexual violence used to coerce and control.....	125
4.4.1.3 Female adopting stereotypical male characteristics to elevate status and power 127	
4.4.2 Theme 5: Male manipulation and control	130
4.4.3 Theme 6: Female camaraderie and gang roles	132
4.5 Themes linked to perceptions and experiences of desisting from the gang	133
4.5.1 Theme 7: Re-evaluating and redefining identity	133
4.5.2 Theme 8: Leaving the area	135
4.5.3 Theme 9: External agency support to leave.....	137
4.6 Recurrent themes linking to joining, relationships and desistance	139
4.6.1 Theme 10: A culture of fear and violence	139
4.6.2 Theme 11: The power of professionals.	141
4.6.3 Theme 12: Youth naivety around gang relationships.....	143
4.7 Chapter Summary.....	145
5. Chapter 5: Discussion	146
5.1 Chapter overview	146
5.2 Addressing the Research Questions	147
5.2.1 Research question 1: Joining gangs.....	147
5.2.1.1 Summary of findings from the current research	147
5.2.1.2 Situating the current research.....	149
5.2.2 Research question 2: Relationships in gangs	152
5.2.2.1 Summary of findings from the current research	152
5.2.2.2 Situating the current research.....	153
5.2.2.2.1 Roles and relationships in gangs	153
5.2.2.2.2 Sexual violence and control within gangs.....	156
5.2.2.2.3 Systemic exploration	158
5.2.3 Research question 3: Desisting from the gang	159
5.2.3.1 Summary of findings from the current research	159
5.2.3.2 Situating the current research.....	160
5.2.4 Summary of the findings.....	161
5.3 Critical review.....	162
5.3.1 Evaluation of the research.....	162
5.3.1.1 Sensitivity to context	163
5.3.1.2 Commitment and rigour	163
5.3.1.3 Transparency and coherence.....	164
5.3.1.4 Impact and importance.....	165

5.3.2 Methodological critique.....	165
5.3.3 Personal Reflexivity.....	168
5.3.4 Overall strength of the study.....	169
5.4 Implications and recommendations.....	169
5.4.1 Implications on an individual level.....	169
5.4.1 Implications on a systemic level.....	171
5.4.2 Implications for future research.....	172
5.5 Chapter summary.....	173
6 Chapter 6: Conclusion.....	174

List of Tables

Table 1: Inclusion/exclusion Criteria for literature search – page 39

Table 2: Summary of papers reviewed – page 44

Table 3: Summary of included studies in the current Qualitative Research Synthesis – page 50

Table 4: Overarching themes synthesised from the second order themes generated – page 55

Table 5: Application of the strategies to establish trustworthiness (Major & Savin-Baden, 2010) – page 64

Table 6: Research question development – page 67

Table 7: Evaluation of alternative methodologies considered – page 77

Table 8: Participant information – page 91

Table 9: The 15-point checklist of criteria for a Good Thematic Analysis Process- page 98

List of Figures

Figure 1: Unified Model of Gang Membership (Alleyne & Wood, 2010) – page 19

Figure 2: The Adjusted Unified Model of Gang Membership (Mozova, 2017) – page 23

Figure 3: Study selection flow diagram from the current research synthesis – page 42

Figure 4: Rating scale to establish rigour of study findings – page 48

Figure 5: Process of conducting meta synthesis – page 54

Figure 6: Third order interpretations –page 61

Figure 7: Map of strategies used to address the research questions – page 70

Figure 8: Narrative timeline tool to aid participants story telling – page 89

Figure 9: The Braun and Clarke (2006) procedure for conducting reflexive thematic analysis – page 94

Figure 10: Themes related to participants' perceptions and experiences of joining gangs – page 110

Figure 11: Themes related to participants' perceptions and experiences of relationships in gangs – page 111

Figure 12: Themes related to participants' perceptions and experiences of desisting from the gang – page 112

Figure 13: Recurrent themes connected to joining, relationships and desistance – page 112

1. Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background and Rationale of the current research

Academic research exploring the affiliation of females with gang activity has historically been a neglected area in research in the UK (Campbell, 1991; Elliot, 2005). Within academic research, female voices within discourse around gang affiliation are often missing or reported from a male perspective (Couper, 2016). Theories looking at the factors that may contribute to gang affiliation and desistance from gang affiliation have been explored, however often theories have been explored in relation to male gang affiliation (Wood & Alleyne, 2010).

Therefore, there is a need to explore the experiences of females affiliated with gangs and to explore them from the perspectives of the females involved. This includes their experiences of becoming involved and being affiliated with gangs, alongside what may have influenced them transitioning away from the gang.

1.2 Personal and professional interest in the research area

One of the reasons that led the researcher to conduct this research focusing on female experiences in gangs was based on personal experiences of lacking understanding and knowledge around female gang affiliation in their previous role as a teacher. The researcher felt that there was a lack of understanding amongst professionals related to risk factors and signs of gang affiliation, particularly in young women.

The researcher has found that as a trainee Educational Psychologist, they have often been working with vulnerable young women and they have found often there has been a lack of awareness around female gang affiliation and a lack of understanding around the support which is available for these young women and girls.

The researcher believes that professionals contribute an important role in identifying and supporting young women who may be involved or at risk of gang affiliation, however there is little research within the UK exploring female experiences from a female perspective. The researcher felt that to inform this understanding it was vital that female voices were heard and captured within research on gangs, and support services are guided by females with an understanding of this area.

1.3 Aims of the research

The aim is to undertake a qualitative exploration of female gang affiliation, with the purpose of exploring how females who have been previously affiliated with gangs perceive their experiences within gangs in terms of joining, their relationships and desistence from the gang.

Within the UK there is little research around the female experience of gang affiliation and often literature has focused solely on the factors that may lead to females joining gangs. The

current study aims to extend this research by exploring the role of females relationships with males and females in the gang linking to joining, gaining affiliation and sustaining their roles in the gang, an area that has not been previously explored. Further exploration around desistance for females affiliated with UK gangs has also not been explored. Therefore, research exploring these experiences is important to gain further insight into females' personal experiences in gangs to strengthen understanding and knowledge in this domain. It is hoped that this study will elevate the voices of females previously affiliated with gangs and offer implications for professionals and wider society.

2. Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Chapter overview

This chapter discusses the challenges in defining gangs and the implications this has for research in this field. Theoretical insights based on research on male gang members is explored alongside a historical overview of research surrounding females gang affiliation in both the USA and UK.

This chapter also consists of a systematic literature review reviewing UK research surrounding female gang affiliation from a female perspective, to offer insight into female experiences and perceptions. These findings provide a rationale for the current research exploring female perceptions and experiences of gang affiliation.

2.2 Defining 'gang' affiliation

The definition of gang affiliation is an area of considerable debate. Many researchers consider gang affiliation to be associated with criminal or antisocial behaviour, however, historically there has been a lack of a coherent definition used across research in this field. Additionally, there is debate around the degree of criminality that is required for a group to be identified as a gang (Couper, 2016).

Thrasher (1927) was one of the first to research gang affiliation in his studies of Chicago gangs. Thrasher (1927) argues that criminal or antisocial behaviour is not a defining feature of gang affiliation, but that gang affiliation can facilitate criminal and antisocial behaviour.

Fernández-Planells et al. (2020) suggested that although criminal activity may not be the main reason why gangs form, policing and political narratives within the USA and Europe reinforce the criminal conceptualisation of gang affiliation. This is supported by contemporary research comparing gang affiliated and non-affiliated young people (Bjerregaard, 2002; Brotherton, 2015; Densley, 2012). These studies suggest that criminal or antisocial behaviour was perceived as the main factor used to characterise gang affiliation from other forms of youth groups association.

Some researchers may suggest that the discourse around gang labelling and gang affiliation may evolve in response to cultural, social and political structures (Couper, 2016), suggesting that gangs are 'dynamic, flexible and ever-changing' (Sanders, 1994, p.6). This may suggest that definitions around gang affiliation may vary depending on geographical location, political narratives, and cultural differences.

Esbensen et al., (2001) explored the importance of having a unified definition of gang affiliation. They stated that a unified definition was important to ensure that intervention and prevention strategies were targeting the correct populations. They discussed that often resource allocation and public concern were closely linked to the perceived magnitude of the issue; therefore, issues around defining gang affiliation may lead to either under or overestimation of gang activity. It is suggested that this could lead to young people not receiving the support they require (Esbensen et al., 2001), resources being incorrectly deployed (XPL, 2013) and/or people being misidentified as being affiliated with a gang, which could be stigmatising (Klein et al., 2006). Additionally, a lack of a unified definition

could lead to questions around the validity and reliability of research findings (Mozova, 2017).

The Drug Threat Team and organised crime command for the National Crime Agency (National Crime Agency, 2019) define a gang as:

- A group which is durable in nature
- Street-orientated
- A group engaged in criminal activity or violence
- A group who identifies with, or lay claim to territory and/or are in conflict with another similar gang

This definition also states that individuals affiliated with the gang have to self-identify as members of the group (National Crime Agency, 2018). Sharp et al. (2006) suggested that definitions that include structural features such as dominance over geographical territory, may be reductionist as this may not be a feature in all gangs, particularly as some gangs may cover numerous geographical locations over the breadth of the country (Glover Williams & Finlay, 2019). The National Crime Agency (2018) suggest that the latter point is becoming more common with many gangs from larger cities, setting up smaller operations in smaller towns with the purpose of setting and transporting drugs; known as County Lines drug operations (National Crime Agency, 2018).

2.2.1 The Eurogang definition (Klein et al, 2001)

The Eurogang research programme was founded in 2005 with the aim of creating a universal definition of street-based gang groups (Klein et al, 2001; Klein et al., 2006).

The Eurogang definition of a street-based gang states:

“A street gang (or troublesome youth group corresponding to a street gang elsewhere) is any durable, street-orientated youth group whose

own identity includes involvement in illegal activity” (Klein et al., 2001:418).

This definition suggests that to be classified as a gang, the group must:

1. Be durable: the group continues to function with at least 3 members despite group members leaving (Weerman et al., 2009).
2. Members of the gang must spend most of their time outside the home, workplace, or school: This reflects that many gangs operate outside, in parks or streets (National Crime Agency, 2018)
3. Members are predominantly youths: This aims to capture the role of adolescents as a high percentage of the group’s members. It is suggested that usually individuals affiliated with gangs are aged between 12 and 25 years old (Alleyne & Wood, 2010, 2012).
4. Participate in illegal behaviours: referring to acts that are antisocial or criminal in nature.
5. The identity concerns group identity, not just individuals’ self-image (Klein, 2001).

The Eurogang definition has similarities to the National Crime Agency, (2018) definition. Weerman et al. (2015) suggests that the Eurogang definition can be universally used to describe street based gangs, even those without a specific geographical territory, as it refers to gang activity being conducted in public domains (Weerman, Bernasco, et al., 2015).

Within this research the Eurogang definition will be adopted to define gang affiliation and activity because it is widely accepted and used as the definition in current research papers.

2.3 Theoretical insights into gang affiliation

When considering an individual's affiliation with gangs, often the British Criminal Justice system and discourses in the media frame this association as a choice (Couper, 2016). However in order to inform prevention and intervention for individuals affiliated with gangs, it is important to deconstruct the wider systemic issues and explore the social, cultural and political factors that may influence an individual's experiences (Chidley & Stringer, 2020).

Several psychological theories have attempted to explore how individuals experience the world whilst considering these contextual factors to explain gang affiliation and desistance.

2.3.1 Social Control Theory (Hirschi, 1969)

Social Control theory (Hirschi, 1969) recognises that gang affiliation may serve a psychological function. Social control theory relates to the formation of a social bond between the individual and a group. It is explained that conformity with the groups norms is achieved through socialisation and the level of conformity demonstrated by the individual is mediated by the individuals attachment, commitment, involvement and beliefs about the group (Hirschi, 1969).

Hirschi (1969) suggests gangs emerge as they provide social control and that community solidarity and unity create the foundations of gang affiliation. This theory suggests that many factors such as social disorganisation in the family home or in the community and complex relationships with others can lead to gang affiliation because this encourages individual's to find social control in groups external to the family. Hirschi (1969) and Thornberry et al., (2002) suggest that the gang provides a sense of belonging that may be absent in other areas of the individual's life. He suggests that gangs often emerge in geographical areas where the community feel marginalised, there is a lack of resources or high levels of boredom (Thornberry et al., 2002). Furthermore, due to the financial pressures that may exist within these communities, it is suggested that parents may be less able to monitor the activities of their children due to additional pressures such as work

commitments; which may leave young people more vulnerable to becoming affiliated with gangs because they will be more likely to have the opportunity to seek social control from external groups (Thornberry et al., 2002).

2.3.2 Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model (1992)

Theories around gang affiliation such as Hirschi's (1969) Social Control theory focus on the individual and how their gang affiliation serves a psychological function. However, the notion of gang affiliation is complex and therefore a more holistic approach considering the role of the individual, their environment and wider societal and cultural factors is required to further understand gang affiliation.

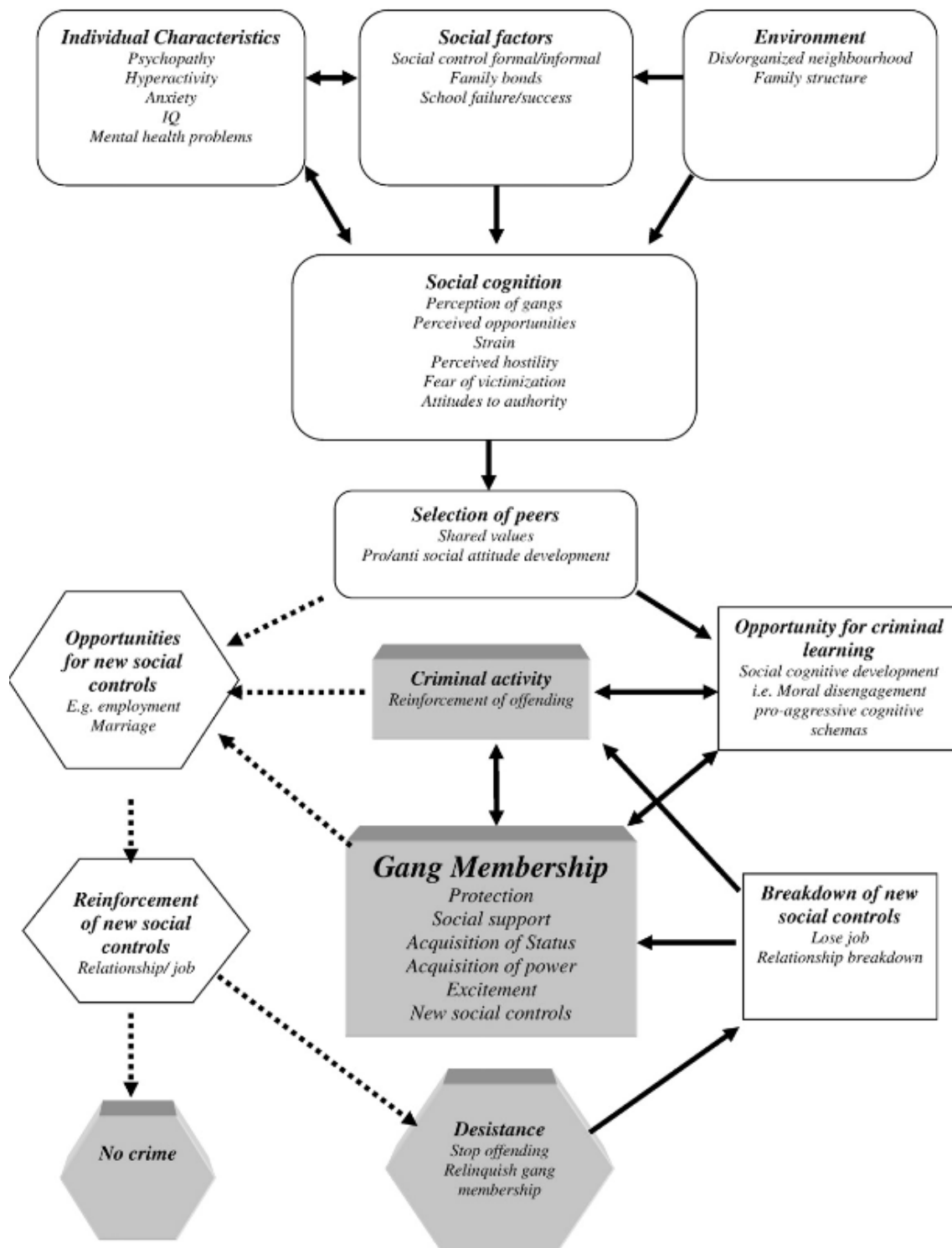
Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model (Bronfenbrenner, 1992) proposes that an individual's experiences are shaped by the different systems within their environment, such as family and peer relationships (microsystem), wider political, cultural, social and economic factors (ecosystem) and societal attitudes and culture (macrosystem). This eco-systemic model could be used as a potential framework to explore gang affiliation and the influence of numerous factors at the various systemic levels. The model could also be used to inform preventative and supportive programmes for individual's affiliated or at risk of gang affiliation. This theory has not been directly applied to gang affiliation but highlights the need to adopt a holistic eco-systemic model to understand the affiliation of individuals within gangs to provide a broader explanation of why they may become affiliated, building upon Hirschi's (1969) Social Control Theory.

2.3.3 The Unified Theory (Alleyne & Wood, 2010)

To further explore these psychological theories, in terms of the factors that may influence affiliation and desistance from gangs, Alleyne and Wood, (2010) aimed to create a broader eco-systemic theoretical framework : the Unified theory. This framework sought to explain why individuals may follow a criminal or non-criminal pathway (Alleyne & Wood, 2010). This

theoretical framework (Figure 1) suggests three levels of factors underpinning gang affiliation: individual, social, and environmental.

Figure 1: Unified Model of Gang Membership (Alleyne & Wood, 2010)



Key:

Solid lines indicate pathways to antisocial and criminal behaviour

Dotted lines indicate pathways away from antisocial or criminal behaviour.

Alleyne and Wood's (2010) framework suggests that gang affiliation may result from a range of individual, social, and environmental factors. They suggest that these factors may link to construct the individual's cognition or perception of what gang affiliation may involve and result in. They suggest that these factors may also influence the individual's perceptions around legitimate opportunities in their life, such as future employment aspirations. They suggest that individuals may become affiliated with the gang due to a perceived lack of legitimate opportunities in their community or academic life and a perception that gang affiliation may result in positive outcomes, such as financial or community benefits.

This model suggests that the individual's cognition or perception of gangs then informs their peer selection. Alleyne and Wood (2010) suggest that individuals form peer connections with individuals they perceive to have similar characteristics and similar circumstances to themselves, or with peers who possess characteristics they wish to adopt. Linking in with Social Control Theory, which suggests that when communities feel marginalised or there is a lack of resources or activities, they are more likely to unify and form groups (Hirschi, 1969).

Alleyne and Wood (2010) argue that for desistance from gang affiliation to occur the individual needs to recognise that there is a new and different way to gain 'social control' through a non-criminal path or pro-social opportunities. Frisby-Osman (2019) suggest that often this occurs through individuals finding legitimate opportunities away from the gang, such as gaining legal employment or forming relationships outside the gang. They suggest that if these pro- 'social controls' are reinforced (such as advances in employment) then desistance is more likely to continue. However, if they break down (such as the individual losing their employment) then an individual may reaffiliate with the gang.

However, Mozova (2017) argued that this model lacks information about psychological processes influencing affiliation and desistance, and suggest that it does not acknowledge the influence of group processes in both criminal and non-criminal pathways.

Wood (2006) suggests that understanding group processes in gangs is important and suggested that social psychological theories such as the Social Control theory (Hirschi, 1969) may provide theoretical insight into how gangs form and are sustained, and therefore how interventions can help to support desistance from gang affiliation. Decker et al., (2013) argue that often interventions to encourage desistance from gangs are unsuccessful, which may highlight the need for further understanding around the group process in gangs.

2.3.4 The Adjusted Unified Theory of Gang membership (Mozova, 2017)

To further explore the group process involved in relation to joining a gang and remaining in a gang, Mozova (2017) interviewed 21 males between the ages of 16 and 18 years old from a Youth Offenders Institution (YOI) in the UK. Her interviews centred around understanding the individual's perceptions of group processes within their gang in relation to social belonging, social comparison and influence, group decision making, power, group norms and goals and social support. This research suggested that many of the individuals interviewed formed friendships that later evolved into gang affiliation and criminal activity. These findings support Alleyne and Wood's (2010) notion that peer selection is an important stage in gang affiliation.

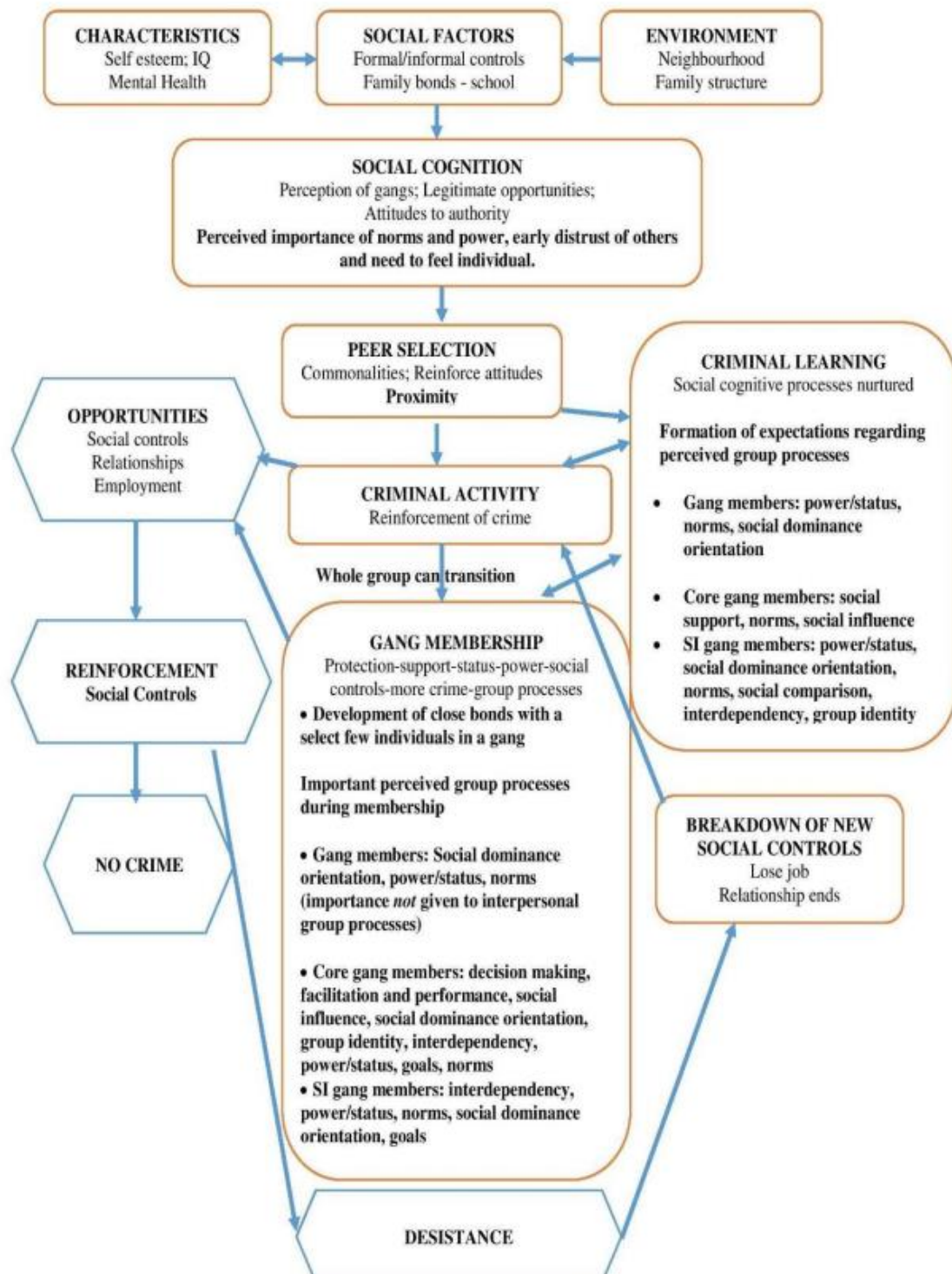
The individuals interviewed also stated that they had pre-conceived ideas around group processes within the gang such as norms, goals and social support, which may suggest that their perceptions around what it meant to be affiliated with a gang had formed prior to them joining the group as the Unified Theory suggests (Alleyne & Wood, 2010). Mozova, (2017) suggested that individuals may have already been aware of gangs in their community and positive perceptions around gang affiliation may have motivated them to affiliate with the gang.

Further stages of her research involved gaining questionnaire feedback from a different group of 94 males who were incarcerated across prisons and YOI's in the UK. They

completed a questionnaire focusing on the conditions that led to them remaining in a gang. She found that gang affiliates associated high perceived social belonging, increased perceived social status and power, and alignment with group social norms as key factors in reinforcing gang affiliation. Wood (2014) suggests that once affiliated with the gang, the individuals reported to act in accordance with group norms, which may enhance their sense of social belonging to the gang, reinforcing their engagement with the gang.

As an implication of this research, Mozova (2017) created The Adjusted Unified Model of Gang membership (Figure 2) which incorporates the group process findings found in her research. Couper (2016) suggests that incorporating an ecological systems approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1992) is beneficial when exploring gang affiliation at the micro and exo-system level, which has been adopted in this model (Mozova, 2017).

Figure 2: The Adjusted Unified Model of Gang membership (Mozova, 2017)



2.4 Research exploring theoretical models of Gang affiliation

2.4.1 Affiliation with gangs

Research suggests that initially the psychological motivators of tangible rewards encourage young people to be involved in gang activity (Knowsley Safeguarding Children's Board, 2017). Gang participation is believed to be sustained through gang affiliation fostering a sense of identity, social belonging and personal significance in a group (Harding, 2014), as suggested by the Adjusted Unified Model of Gang Membership (Mozova, 2017).

Within Social Control theory (Hirschi, 1969), Hirschi (1969) explains that many factors such as social disorganisation in the family home or in the community and complex relationships with others can lead to gang affiliation. Miller (2001) found that 60% of young people associated with gangs had witnessed three or more of the following within their home environment: abuse, violence, drug abuse, alcohol abuse and incarceration of a family member, compared to 24% of young people not affiliated with gangs. This suggests that young people affiliated with gangs may have complex home lives and for some individuals gang affiliation may be viewed as a surrogate family for young people offering the nurture, acceptance and sense of belonging that may be absent within their own family background (Auyong et al., 2018; Campbell, 1984; Miller & Decker, 2001; Pepin, 2018; Young et al., 2014). Additionally, some of the young people experienced the incarceration of a family member, which may suggest that criminality was observed within the family or there were pre-existing affiliations with gang activity from family members. However, it is important to acknowledge the lack of causality within this data, and that these are factors that may contribute to an ecological overview of the individual's context.

Research suggests that gang affiliation could be perceived as offering young people the opportunity to gain financial rewards (Alleyne & Pritchard, 2016; Smithson et al., 2009). It is argued that within marginalised communities the financial gains associated with gangs may be more motivational as disposable income may be less available and therefore goods deemed

non-essential less likely to be purchased (Eshalomi, 2020; Frisby-Osman, 2019; J. L. Wood, 2014). Stone (2018) found that young people living in deprived neighbourhoods were more likely to be involved with gangs and found that a key factor supporting gang affiliation was found to be the social capital gained through an increase in monetary wealth, tangible goods and enhanced reputation; which within gangs is often gained through criminal activities such as drug dealing (Smithson et al., 2009). Furthermore, Harding (2014) suggests that young people may join a gang due to a perceived lack of legitimate opportunities in their community or academic lives. He reported that young people may be more likely to become affiliated with gangs following perceived academic failure at school, school exclusion, or if there is a lack of social support in the community (Harding, 2014; Longfield, 2019).

Linking in with Unified theory (Alleyne & Wood, 2010), this may suggest that young people may develop a favourable perception of opportunities associated with gang affiliation, such as social belonging, social acceptance, social status, protection and financial security that they perceive to be 'impossible' via other methods. This is important as it may suggest that family or environmental factors could influence the likelihood of young people becoming affiliated with gangs.

2.4.2 Desistance from gangs

Desistance in relation to gangs is an understudied phenomenon (Klein et al., 2006), with very little research exploring how and why people leave gangs in both the male and female population.

Decker et al., (2013) explored gang desistance in males in the USA and found that often desistance is gradual as males mature and spend less time in the gangs, or they leave abruptly often because of a significant life event, such as being attacked or going to prison. These findings have also been supported by Vigil, (1988) who reported that desistance from

gang affiliation for males is often gradual and can occur due to a combination of factors or events. However, the likelihood of successful desistance occurring depends on the individual's role in the gang. Laub and Sampson, (2001) stated that core members of the gang found desistance much harder than peripheral members because core members received more social and economic benefits from the gang. Pyrooz and Decker, (2011) reported that social and emotional ties to the gang, had a large impact on desistance, and members reported that as the amount of time away from the gang increased, their number of ties to the former gang network also decreased, increasing the likelihood of them remaining desisted. This therefore suggests that the first few months away from the gang may be the most important time to offer support around maintaining desistance, as their ties to the gang are still high and the likelihood of 'relapse' to gang life is high.

Little is known about why females desist from gangs, but evidence from the USA suggests that some factors such as motherhood may influence desistance.

For females affiliated with Gangs, research in the USA has suggested that becoming a mother was deemed as a significant trigger in females leaving gangs or reducing their active involvement with the gang (Fleisher & Krienert, 2004). However, Hoang (2007) indicated that for many young females, leaving the gang may be challenging due to social and economic pressures, such as securing employment or safe housing away from the gang. Hoang (2007) reported that these pressures may increase if the female has a child as they may fear that seeking support from government agencies may result in their child being placed into the care system, and often the child's father may be a gang member, making desistance challenging. However, this research focusses on a US population and within the UK there is an absence of literature exploring why females transition from gangs, which may offer insightful information on how to encourage and support young females to leave gangs.

2.5 Historical overview of female gang affiliation

Historically, research around gang affiliation was conducted in the field of criminology and primarily focused on understanding the offending behaviour of young men (Melde, 2016). This led to female affiliation with gangs as being perceived as directly linked to male gang affiliation, as often information relating to female gang affiliation has been “described by male gang members to male researchers and interpreted by male academics” (Campbell, 1990, p. 166).

In early research on gangs, Thrasher (1927) described stereotypically ‘feminine’ females’ roles in gangs as linked to sexual activity and relationships with males, and viewed them as subordinate members of the gang who served the gang’s desires. He only described females who adopted ‘stereotypical’ male gender roles as ‘active’ members of the gang, who were involved in violence, criminal behaviour, and the day-to-day activities of the gang. This viewpoint therefore creates a narrative of stereotypical male roles in gangs being associated with criminality and violence, and stereotypical female roles being associated with sexual activity (Couper, 2016).

Thrasher's (1927) research has substantial limitations because his research was produced from a male-centred perspective whereby the female perspective has been captured through the male voice. This therefore leads researchers to question whether a different view of female gang affiliation may arise when the narrative is obtained from females themselves from a modern day perspective of gender roles (Kelly & Steeves, 2015).

2.6 Research on female experiences in gangs in USA

Within the domain of gang research, the majority of research studies American gangs (Campbell, 1990). In the last 25 years, researchers in the USA have increasingly focused on exploring the roles of females from a female perspective, across the country (Campbell, 1984; Harris, 1988; Laidler & Hunt, 2001; Miller & Decker, 2001; Quicker, 1983). The roles of females described across these studies suggests that females may adopt roles based on

their perceived skills, motivations and relationships with individuals affiliated with the gangs.

Quicker (1983) explored the views of females affiliated with a gang in Los Angeles. She reported that females perceived that they had become affiliated with the gang as they wished to join the gang and needed to demonstrate their fighting skills and ability to cope in pressurised environments before being affiliated with the gang. This research suggests that within some gangs in the USA, female affiliates had to demonstrate certain characteristics and prove their 'worth' to the gang. This viewpoint is supported by research by Campbell, (1984) who found that within New York gangs, female affiliates stated that their status in the gang was dependent upon their skills rather than sexuality, gender, or relationships with males.

Furthermore, ethnographic studies highlight that across the USA the nature of females' experiences in gangs is multifaceted. Research by Harris (1988) in California reported that across interviews with 21 Latin-American gangs' affiliates, females were described to have adopted more traditional stereotypical roles. Female affiliates who were described as having a masculine image were typically viewed as members of the gang and were involved in the daily activities of the gang. A masculine image was associated with fighting skills and physical dominance. Whereas female affiliates who were described as having a feminine image were typically associated with males' members of the gang through long term relationships with one gang member or sexual relationships with numerous members. Therefore, this research suggests that the roles females adopted in the gang were associated with their perceived image related to traditional stereotypical gender roles.

Miller and Decker (2001) explored the gendered nature of gang affiliation in St Louis. They found that females described a high level of involvement in gang activity, and often this would be linked to "low level" criminal activity such as hiding weapons or drugs within their homes or delivering goods. Whereas males in the gang were associated with "serious"

criminal activity such as using guns or committing violent attacks or homicides. This suggests that there is a perception within the gangs studied, that males or those with stereotypical masculine characteristics may be more suited to undertaking violent and/or “serious” criminal roles.

Within the domain of gang research, the phenomenon of female only gangs is an area of increasing interest (Couper, 2016). Laidler and Hunt (2001) questioned the role of females across different types of gangs: mixed gender gangs and all female gangs. They interviewed 65 female affiliates in San Francisco, belonging to 7 different gangs across the city. They found that only 1 gang was described as all female, suggesting that this type of gang may be less common. Their research suggested that within mixed gender gangs’ males were described to hold more of the power regarding decision making and would attempt to enforce stereotypical traditional gender role expectations on the females when the female affiliates challenged their decision making. Across all the gang types, females described experiencing high levels of violence including domestic violence. They found that violence within relationships was associated more with mixed gender gangs with some females describing how their partners would attempt to control their actions and enforce traditional gender roles using violence. Within female only gangs, females described feeling a sense of safety and stability and spoke of violence from other gangs rather than from members within their own gang. This therefore suggests that the role of males within gangs may be a factor in determining the experiences of females and the activities they undertake within the gang.

These studies suggest that with the US context there are differing experiences and roles of female affiliates within the gangs. Some research suggests that an adherence to the traditional gender expectations is still prevalent in some gangs, whereas in other gangs female affiliates describe status and group roles as not being linked to gender, instead linked with perceived skill. However, the need for females to ‘prove’ their skills prior to gang affiliation (Quicker, 1983), may imply that prejudice around skills expectations linked to stereotypical gender roles is prevalent within the gangs studied.

Generalising evidence from the USA to a UK context is problematic due to differences in the socio-economic environment in America (Couper, 2016) and differences across cultures and legal systems. For example in the USA it is legal to own a gun and gang violence is often linked with gun use (Campbell, 1990), whereas this is not the case in the UK (Firmin, 2010).

2.7 Research on female experiences in gangs in the UK

Within the UK the literature around gangs is less developed than in the USA (Couper, 2016), however over the last 15 years research in the domain of gang research in the UK has increased (Alleyne & Pritchard, 2016; Beckett et al., 2013; Bennett & Holloway, 2004; Densley, 2012; Glover Williams & Finlay, 2019; Mozova, 2017; Smithson et al., 2009). Despite this increased focus on gangs, there continues to be a lack of attention dedicated to the experiences of females within UK gangs (Esbensen et al., 1999; Couper, 2016).

Often research around UK gangs focuses on the experiences of males within the gang, often with the rationale that females play a secondary role to males within gangs (Beckett et al., 2013; Esbensen et al., 1999; Kintrea, 2008). Research by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (2008) claims that females and young women “are subservient in male gangs and even submissive, sometimes being used to carry weapons or drugs, sometimes using their sexuality as a passport or being sexually exploited, e.g. in initiation rituals, in revenge by rival gangs or where a younger group of females sexually service older male gang members’ (Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), 2008, p. 7), however these findings are based on male orientated research on gang affiliation.

Within the UK, it is reported that within gangs, the rates of female affiliation are often unknown and as a result females are often hidden from prevention and support services (Couper, 2016).

Eshalomi, (2020) highlighted that the data held by the Metropolitan Police service in London for 2020 only recorded 6 females (children and adults) associated with gangs, representing 0.2% recorded of gang associated individuals (Metropolitan Police Service, 2020). However, Eshalomi, (2020) suggests that this percentage isn't representative of the true involvement of females in gangs. Based on a freedom of information request sent to councils across London boroughs, it was identified that 1049 females had identified gang affiliation as a factor in assessments conducted by Children's Services. This indicates that females may be perceived as less visible to agencies such as the police and therefore are less represented in national figures surrounding gang affiliation.

Previous research has also documented that females are approximately 80% less likely to be stopped and searched by the police than males (Bradford et al., 2013). These figures may suggest that because females are perceived as less visible to agencies such as the police they may be more likely to be targeted by gangs involved in county line drug operations (National Crime Agency., 2016).

2.8 Implications of current research

2.8.1 Male dominated narrative

Feminist researchers in the domain of gangs have critiqued research on gang affiliation as relying on the male perspective to develop an understanding of female experience (Couper, 2016). They argue that gathering perspectives through the male voice may lead to a distorted perception of the roles, motivations and experiences of females affiliated to gangs (Campbell, 1991; Carrington, 2013; Couper, 2016).

It is important that perceptions of female gang affiliation are gathered from female perspectives. Research by Moore, (1991) highlights this potential distortion in perception of females when interviewing mixed gender gangs affiliates in the USA. He reported a disparity between the views held by male and female gang members. 33% of the female gang

members felt that they were objectified by male gang members, whereas approximately 56% of male gang members felt that they objectified the female members in the group. Additionally, Moore, (1991) reported that many of the male gang members failed to acknowledge that females were 'real' members of the gang, viewing them as serving the sexual needs of the gang. This therefore suggests that there may be a discrepancy between how female gang affiliates are perceived and treated by male affiliates, emphasising that exploration of female experiences needs to be conducted by gaining female voices.

2.8.2 Service provision

Longfield (2019) estimated that around 27,000 English young people (all genders) are active members of a gang, with a further 60,000 young people being linked to gang activity through siblings, peers or other family members. However, only 6560 of these young people are known to Children's Services, meaning that over 80,000 children are involved or exposed to gang related activities but are not identified to support services. Displaying the large disparity between those individuals identified by services and thus accessing support, and those who are at risk of affiliation. Eshalomi (2020) stated that further distortion around the rates and roles of female affiliation in gangs has led to many females being unable to access bespoke support to prevent or aid desistance from gangs.

Within the UK, Southgate (2011) interviewed professionals from community and voluntary sectors to explore their understandings around female gang affiliation, and how their provisions supported female gang affiliates. She stated that many of the services highlighted a lack of appropriate support for females, due to a lack of understanding around how females join and leave gangs, and their roles within the gang. She reflected that many of the services offered centred around reducing knife crime in gangs and focused on offering pro-social activities such as football and boxing within the community. She reflected that for some females at risk of gang affiliation or associated with gangs, these services may not be deemed relevant, engaging, or appropriate. She reflected that a multiagency way of working across statutory and non-statutory sectors was required to identify and support females

who were involved or at risk of gang affiliation to ensure that appropriate support was available.

The current research suggests that further information surrounding the experiences of females affiliated with gangs in the UK is required. Further research focusing on the experiences of females affiliated with UK gangs will be explored within the systematic literature review.

2.9 Systematic Research synthesis

2.9.1 Introduction to systematic research synthesis

Research from the USA suggests that females play an important role in gang activities, and emerging evidence suggests that the role of females in UK gangs is often under reported and lacks understanding (Eshalomi, 2020). To discover and explore the experiences of females in UK gangs, a systematic search and review of the UK literature is required.

2.9.2 Defining research synthesis

A research synthesis is defined as a process whereby several research studies are used to explore what is known from existing research around a given research question, alongside assessing, and appraising the evidence in terms of its quality and relevance to the research question (Gough, 2007). The current review aimed to aggregate the current research available on the experiences of females affiliated with gangs in the UK to gain an insight into what existing research has found and to identify gaps within the literature or areas that require further exploration.

2.9.3 Qualitative research synthesis

2.9.3.1 Method overview and rationale

Qualitative research synthesis typically aims to facilitate a comprehensive view of a research area through aggregation of qualitative studies, to promote theory development, higher level abstraction, and transferability to make qualitative findings accessible for practical application (Zimmer, 2006).

Research by the Cochrane Collaboration (Harris et al, 2018) outlines various methodologies that could be used to synthesise studies. The researcher considered three methodologies for this synthesis: Meta ethnography synthesis, Refutational synthesis and Lines of argument synthesis.

Refutational synthesis aims to synthesise the contradictions between studies to provide a holistic view of a research area (Harris et al, 2018). For example, synthesising studies that explore the views of females affiliated with gangs and studies considering the views of the professionals working with them to explore contradictions between findings and to create a holistic overview of their views. Whilst Lines of argument synthesis aims to synthesise the findings from studies looking at different areas and draw the findings together to create an overview of a research area. For example, looking at studies which individually explore joining, affiliation and desistance from gangs and synthesising the studies to create a holistic overview of gang affiliation.

Meta ethnography aims to synthesise data on similar topic areas to identify similarities. This approach also considers the eco-systemic context of the data, such as how culture and society have shaped the data, and the influence of the researcher in the synthesis process. This approach was perceived to be the most appropriate as unlike the other approaches it focuses on aggregating the similarities in research papers. The papers found consider gang affiliation from joining to leaving the gang from a singular perspective, therefore it was concluded that adopting a Meta ethnography synthesis was the most appropriate methodology for studies exploring gang affiliation.

Meta ethnographic synthesis methodology aims to discover commonalities in research and create a comprehensive understanding of an area by conducting interpretive analysis of existing findings through “third order interpretations” (Savin-Baden, 2010; Savin-Baden & Major, 2007; Zimmer, 2006). This method draws upon the principles of meta-ethnography to enable the reviewer to re-interpret data from a range of qualitative studies with multiple study designs, to generate higher order themes to enhance conceptual or theoretical understanding of a phenomenon (Noblit & Hare, 1988).

Meta-ethnography was a recommended approach used within many other qualitative studies (Harris et al, 2018), and as an approach to synthesis that is accessible for a novice researcher (Campbell et al, 2011). It was also felt that the use of an ethnographic methodology aligns with the notion of eco-systemic approaches to understand and generate insight into gang affiliation as utilised in the Unified (Alleyne & Wood, 2010) and Adjusted Unified theories of gang affiliation (Mozova, 2017). Meta ethnography, in line with eco-systemic theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1992), acknowledges how the data is shaped by culture, society and the environment and the influence of the researcher on the synthesis process (Barnett-Page and Thomas, 2009).

It is intended that adopting this methodological approach to research synthesis would provide a methodologically rigorous framework for the synthesis and interpretation of the findings from existing research in this research area (Savin-Baden, 2010).

2.9.3.2 Advantages

Adopting a methodologically rigorous framework is advantageous as it provides a means to synthesise and form interpretations when exposed to a vast quantity of qualitative information (Savin-Baden, 2010). This framework provides a method of advancing understanding and insight within an area of research and inform the development of evidence-based practice.

2.9.3.3 Methodological constraints

Despite this, there are methodological constraints. When conducting a qualitative research synthesis, the researcher is restricted by the questions asked and the potentially limited amount of qualitative data available in this area of research (Savin-Baden, 2010). This limitation is often reduced through the development of an inclusion criterion.

Additionally, it is argued that typically qualitative studies may aim to explore the experiences of an individual which may be undermined by the synthesis of studies. It is important that during aggregation that the individual context regarding the individual and setting information are considered and provided (Savin-Baden & Major, 2007). It is important that the researcher rigorously reports and reflects upon their interpretations to help counteract researcher bias in the synthesis, alongside utilising methods to establish the plausibility of interpretations (Savin-Baden, 2010).

2.9.3.4 Review question

A qualitative research synthesis was conducted to answer the following review question:

What can be learnt from existing research about the experiences of females affiliated with gangs in the UK?

2.9.4 Synthesis Design

2.9.4.1 Search strategy

To conduct a thorough review of the existing literature, a systematic literature search strategy is required (Savin-Baden, 2010). A comprehensive search of the literature was carried out between 12/07/2021 and 14/07/2021 to discover a research base for the current review question, with the aim of locating the most relevant research studies for consideration (Appendix A).

2.9.4.2 Exploratory searches

Manual searches were conducted using internet search engines and University library databases (Google Scholar, Google, NuSearch) to explore the key concepts relating to female affiliation with gangs, using the following search terms: female gang UK. This information helped the development of keyword terms for the purposes of the systematic database search.

2.9.4.3 Systematic Database searches

Three databases were used in this literature search: Psych INFO (OVID), ProQuest (access to over 54 databases) and Web of Science. Searches of the 'grey' literature in the area were conducted through Ethos (British doctoral thesis library resource), which is specific to the UK context.

These databases were searched using a range of terms and synonyms were considered using Boolean operators to broaden the search and to allow for differential terminology to be considered (e.g., female, woman, women, girl). The search strategy and terms are outlined in Appendix A.

The bibliographic software Zotero was used to help manage and organise the saved articles.

The researcher also performed hand searches of the reference lists contained in the relevant literature to try and locate the most relevant studies to address the research question.

2.9.4.4 Inclusion criteria

The inclusion criteria applied when conducting the literature search is outlined in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Inclusion/exclusion Criteria for literature search

Feature	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
<i>Country</i>	UK studies	Studies conducted in countries outside of the UK.
<i>Sample</i>	Participants that identify as female. Female participants who have experienced gang affiliation for more than 6 months.	Views held by other genders or by professionals with no personal gang affiliation.
<i>Setting</i>	Street/community operating gang.	Prison or youth offender gang operations.
<i>Study focus</i>	Experiences of females affiliated with the gang. Explicit references made to the individual's experiences of gang affiliation.	Exclusive focus on the deficits or factors that led to gang affiliation. Exclusive focus on experiences prior to gang affiliation. Exclusive focus on experiences post desistence from gang affiliation.
<i>Research design</i>	Qualitative design	Quantitative design only.

<i>Data presentation</i>	Thick descriptions (quotations)	Unsupported descriptions
<i>Publication</i>	Peer reviewed journals Grey literature (theses/dissertations/ government reviews)	Other publications such as: magazine articles, books, or book reviews.
<i>Publication date</i>	On or after 1999	Any papers published before 1999.

2.9.5 Rationale for inclusion/ exclusion criteria

2.9.5.1 Country

Many studies around female gang affiliation have been conducted in the USA, however the socio-economic and cultural climate differs between the USA and the UK. For this reason, only studies conducted in the UK were included in the current review.

2.9.5.2 Participant sample and setting

The views of females were sought for the current review as they are best positioned to reflect on their own experiences affiliated with gangs. Only studies that gathered the views of females who had been affiliated with gangs for 6 months or more were sought in this review as these viewpoints will offer a representation of the experiences of females within this setting. Viewpoints held by other genders or professionals were excluded from this review.

It is acknowledged that some of the literature from a male or professional viewpoint may have included the experiences of females, however previous literature suggests that this viewpoint may offer a different perception of females experiences to that held by the females themselves (Moore, 1991), so was excluded from this review.

2.9.5.3 Study focus

As the research question sought to learn about the experiences of females affiliated with gangs, only studies that adopted a focus on the direct experiences of being affiliated with a gang were included. Studies that exclusively focused on the factors that led to gang affiliation, experiences prior to and/or post desistence from gang affiliation were excluded for the purposes of this review.

2.9.5.4 Research Design

The current review focuses on the experiences of females, therefore only studies that contained at least some elements of qualitative design were included in this review.

2.9.5.5 Data presentation

The studies needed to contain a rich level of qualitative data from the original study such as thick descriptions and quotations to ensure that the study captured the voices of females thoroughly. Therefore, only studies that included original qualitative data were included.

2.9.5.6 Publication

Due to the lack of peer reviewed literature in this area, grey literature was also included. Savin-Baden (2010) suggest that often grey literature contains a high level of rich detailed descriptions which is required for this method.

2.9.5.7 Publication date

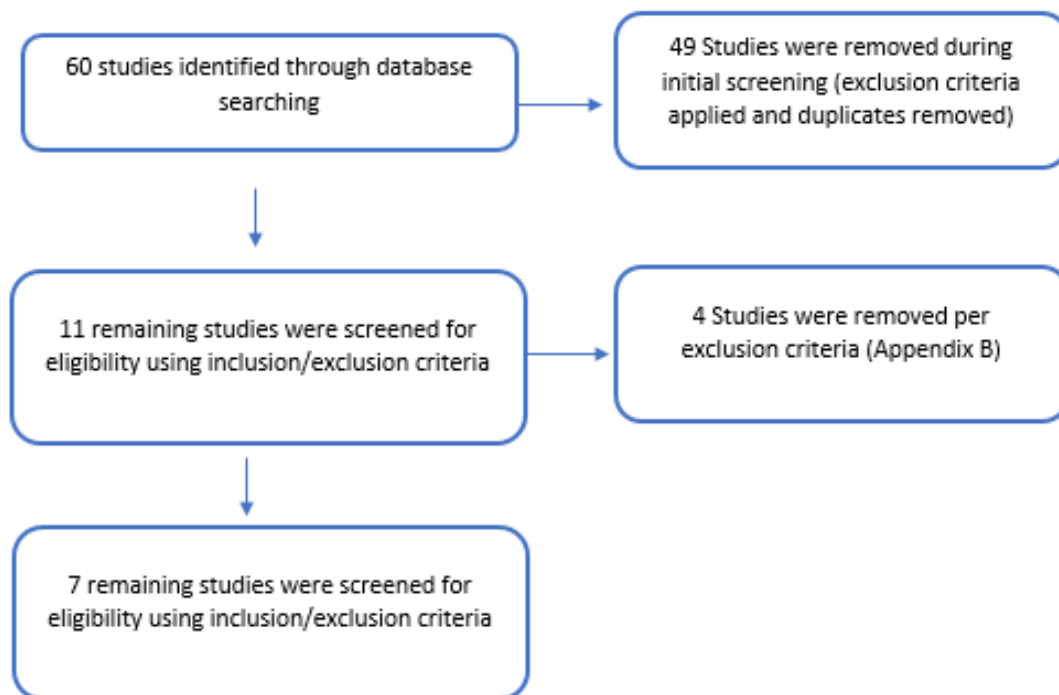
Papers published on or after 1999 were considered for this review, because it was felt that a wide timespan of 23 years may capture the limited research pertaining to females in this field.

2.10 Analysis and synthesis procedure

2.10.1 Situating the studies

Initial screening of study titles and abstracts was yielded by the using the inclusion and exclusion strategy outlined in table 1. Further screening of the remaining full text articles was conducted for relevance to the purpose of the study. Figure 3 outlines this process below. Details of the excluded studies can be found in Appendix B. Seven studies were identified for the final selection in the current review.

Figure 3: Study selection flow diagram from the current research synthesis



2.10.2 Included Studies Summary

A total of seven studies met the inclusion criteria for this review. An overview of the characteristics of the included studies is presented below.

Table 2: Summary of papers reviewed

Author/Year/Country/Publication	Sample/ Setting
<p>Firmin, (2010)</p> <p>England</p> <p>Report as part of The Female Voice in Violence project by Race on the Agenda (ROTA)</p>	<p>217 females (187 focus group, 30 1-1 interviews), 132 males (127 focus group, 5 1-1 interviews) from London, Liverpool, Manchester, and Birmingham. Participants were aged between 13 and 60 years old, with over 80% of participants between 13 and 25 years old.</p>
<p>Beckett et al., (2013)</p> <p>England</p> <p>Report commissioned by Children's Commissioner's office</p>	<p>1-1 interviews with 150 young people, 8 single-sex focus groups with 38 young people across 6 research sites in England including inner city, suburban and semi-rural areas. No ages were provided for interviewees.</p>
<p>The centre for social justice and XPL (2018)</p> <p>England</p> <p>Report</p>	<p>Young females (N=4) affiliated with London street gangs. No ages were provided of interviewees.</p>
<p>Couper (2016)</p> <p>England</p> <p>Doctoral Thesis</p>	<p>Females (N=4) with previous experiences of gang involvement. Females were aged between 17 and 22 years old.</p>
<p>Elliott (2012)</p> <p>Scotland</p> <p>Doctoral Thesis</p>	<p>Interviews with female current and former gang members (n=20) in mixed gender gangs based in London, Manchester, Liverpool, Yorkshire, and Derby. No ages were provided for interviewees.</p>

<p>Choak (2018)</p> <p>England</p> <p>Doctoral thesis</p>	<p>Interviews with females aged 18-25 (n=26) who are or were affiliated to gangs in London. Interviews were also conducted with males and professionals but were not analysed in this review.</p>
<p>Walter (1999)</p> <p>England</p> <p>Doctoral Thesis</p>	<p>Interviews with females (n=25) who were currently or previous members of a gang.</p> <p>No ages were provided for interviewees.</p>

2.10.2.1 Setting and Sample

All the current studies sought the views of females affiliated with gangs. The participants were aged between 13 years old and 60 years old, with most studies participants aged between 15 years old and 30 years old.

All participants were currently living in the UK; six of studies were conducted in England and one was conducted in Scotland. Four of the English studies gained the views of females affiliated or previously affiliated with gangs in London. The other two English studies focused on gang experiences in a range of English cities including London, Manchester, and Liverpool.

2.10.2.2 Topic Relevant to current research

All the studies in the final review aimed to seek the views of females who are or were affiliated with gangs. For all of the studies gaining female perspectives was the primary aim of the research, but the topic focus differed between studies: youth violence and criminality (Firmin, 2010), sexual violence and exploitation (Beckett et al., 2013), or more generally focused on female's experiences (Choak, 2018; Couper, 2016; Elliott, 2012; The Centre for Social Justice & XLP, 2013; Walter, 1999).

2.10.2.3 Methodology, Data collection and analysis

A range of qualitative research methods were used in the studies. One to one interview was the primary method of data collection used by all studies. Focus groups were also used as a supplementary method in two of the studies. All the studies used either a form of Thematic

analysis, grounded theory or Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to explore the views of the women interviewed.

2.10.2.4 Publication

All the seven studies were found through searches of grey literature with five of the seven studies consisting of doctoral theses. One study was a commissioned report by Race on the Agenda as part of the Female Voice in Violence project (2010) and one study was commissioned by the Centre for Social Justice in collaboration with London charity XLP (2018).

2.10.3 Analysis and Synthesis Procedure

2.10.3.1 Situating the studies

Savin-Baden, (2010) suggested that there are numerous methods that can be used to compare and build themes that represent the qualitative dataset. Reciprocal translational analysis allows the researcher to identify key themes and concepts in each study and translate these to form judgements across studies (Savin-Baden, 2010). The process of conducting reciprocal translational analysis involves the researcher initially reading the selected papers to gain familiarisation with the studies. Synthesis of the studies is then conducted in three stages, and throughout the process the influence of the researcher is acknowledged and the need for researcher reflexivity emphasised.

In the first stage, the researcher analysed the findings from each paper in turn to generate first order themes. In the second stage the themes from each paper were refined and synthesised across papers to form second order themes. In the final stage, the second order themes were interpreted to generate overarching themes identified within the papers synthesised, and third order interpretations were generated to explore how the second order themes could offer insight into gang affiliation.

This approach to analysis was deemed appropriate to the current review as it allowed for the concepts between studies to be captured and translated to form a description of the current area of study.

2.10.3.2 Identifying findings

Savin-Baden, (2010) suggested that data should contain thick, rich descriptions such as quotations and should provide contextual information such as the setting and participants to allow the researchers to position the themes within a valid context. Savin-Baden, (2010) suggested that this information should be presented in a tabulated format to allow comparison between contextual information to be conducted (see table 2).

2.10.3.3 Rigour in the findings

Savin-Baden, (2010) recommend using a rating schedule to establish the rigour of the study's findings (see Figure 4). This rating schedule provided a framework for assessing the rigour of the studies presented in Table 2.

Figure 4: Rating scale to establish the rigour of study findings (reproduced from Savin-Baden, (2010), p.61)

<i>Unequivocal</i>	Findings supported with clear, compelling evidence
<i>Credible</i>	Findings are plausible given the weight of evidence
<i>Unsupported</i>	Findings are suggested but are not supported by data

All the included studies were quality appraised using the rating scale in figure 4. Studies which were deemed to be unequivocal included rich data typically in the form of data extracts to support the analysis and provided contextual information around how the data

was gathered, and any factors that influenced data collection, analysis and conclusions. Studies deemed credible included examples of the data generated to support analysis but the evidence provided was not rich data, lacked contextualisation and/or may not be provided consistently throughout the paper. Studies deemed unsupported would provide findings which were unsupported by data, evidence and/or the contextual information provided. For studies deemed unsupported, the researcher excluded these studies from the synthesis at this point because the findings were not supported by data.

As outlined in table 3, all of the papers appraised were deemed as unequivocal because they provided a high level of rich data to support their findings and the data was contextualised. It is important to acknowledge that the within appraisal had limitations due to the fact that all included studies came from the grey literature i.e. thesis and non-peer reviewed/commissioned research reports. For these types of studies, there is often an expectation that the studies include rich data extracts and contextualised data. To further support the appraisal process additional appraisal to ensure the plausibility and trustworthiness of the studies was conducted (see section 2.15). This was deemed important to ensure that the studies synthesised were credible and had transferability, particularly as one of the studies was commissioned by the Children's commissioner, an organisation appointed by the Conservative government of the day.

Table 3: Summary of included studies in the current Qualitative Research Synthesis

Author/Year/Country /Publication	Sample/ Setting	Topic (Relevant to Review Question)	Methodology	Data collection	Main themes/ concepts identified by authors	Quality/ Rigour
Firmin, (2010) England Report as part of The Female Voice in Violence project by Race on the Agenda (ROTA)	217 females (187 focus group, 30 1-1 interviews), 132 males (127 focus group, 5 1- 1 interviews) from London, Liverpool, Manchester, and Birmingham. Participants were aged between 13 and 60 years old, with over 80% of participants between 13 and 25 years old.	Capture the views of young people who have associations with gangs in relation to experience of serious youth violence and criminal gangs.	Thematic analysis	Individual interviews, Focus groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fear of implications of disclosure • Sexual violence and manipulation normalised • Female roles • Lack of alternatives 	Unequivocal

Beckett et al., 2013 England Report commissioned by Children's Commissioner's office	interviews with 150 young people, 8 single-sex focus groups with 38 young people across 6 research sites in England including inner city, suburban and semi-rural areas. No ages were provided for interviewees.	Explore the scale, nature and factors influencing gang- associated sexual violence and exploitation in England.	Thematic analysis	1-1 Interviews Focus groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Status in relationships • Females blamed for sexual exploitation/viole nce 	Unequivocal
The centre for social justice and XPL (2018) England Report	Young females (N=4) affiliated with London street gangs. No ages were provided for interviewees.	Explore the experiences of females affiliated with gangs in London.	Case study approach	1-1 Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Female roles • Sexual exploitation normalised • Desistance: Mentoring/ motherhood 	Unequivocal

Couper (2016) England Doctoral Thesis	Females (N=4) with previous experiences of gang involvement. Females were aged between 17 and 22 years old.	Female perceptions around their experiences of being involved in gang activity	Interpretative Phenomenological analysis	1-1 interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Domestic abuse normalised • Protected by gang <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of alternatives to gang 'life'. 	Unequivocal
Elliott (2012) Scotland Doctoral Thesis	Interviews with female current and former gang members (n=20) in mixed gender gangs based in London, Manchester, Liverpool, Yorkshire, and Derby. No ages were provided of interviewees.	To provide a comprehensive and detailed description of the daily lives of females in gangs.	Grounded theory	1-1 interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationship status linked to recognition • Belonging • Lack of alternatives • Desistance: motherhood/maturity/ trauma 	Unequivocal
Choak (2018) England Doctoral thesis	Interviews with females aged 18-25 (n=26) who are or were affiliated to	To address the gap in knowledge surrounding young females and 'road	Thematic analysis	1-1 interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Female roles varied • Linked to perceived 	Unequivocal

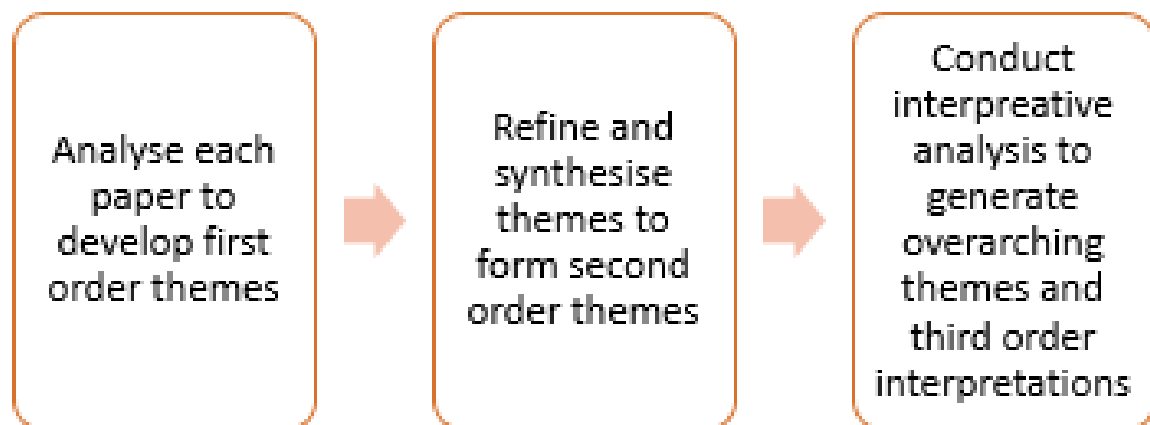
	gangs in London. Interviews were also conducted with males and professionals but were not analysed in this review.	culture' (street gang culture).			femininity/ gender roles.	
Walter (1999) England Doctoral Thesis	Interviews with females (n=25) who were currently or previous members of a gang. No ages were provided for interviewees.	To investigate how young females construct and understand their participation in delinquent groups.	Grounded reflexive methodology	1-1 interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Belonging • Roles of females <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acceptance • Sexual violence normalised 	Unequivocal

2.11 Analysis

2.11.1 Developing first order themes/codes

This phase of quantitative synthesis involved examining the studies' findings for the presence of themes (Major & Savin-Baden, 2010). The subsequent phase of the process is to identify common themes across multiple studies, whilst also acknowledging any themes that occur less frequently (Figure 5). This process involved reading the data to identify cross-study concepts to synthesise findings. The first order themes identified for the seven final studies are presented in Appendix C.

Figure 5: Process of conducting a meta ethnography synthesis



2.12 Synthesis

2.12.1 Developing second order themes

The synthesis phase of the review involved identifying and combining pre-existing themes across multiple studies to develop composite themes. This created second order themes, whereby themes are structured to present common, recurring themes across studies. The development of second order themes and overarching themes is presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Overarching themes synthesised from the second order themes generated

Overarching themes						
	Relationships: complex and controlling	Female roles	Criminality: Accessories	Fear	Gang 'family'	Self and society
Second order themes						
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Peer Relationships -Sexual relationships -Attitudes towards sexual violence/exploitation -Geographical implications on relationships -Manipulation by males -Attraction to exciting/dangerous life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -3 main Female roles: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Defeminising Gangster girl, Sexualise female and homemaker -Traditional female traits linked to roles -Recruiting other females 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Accessories to criminal acts -Being used to exploit other gangs -Carrying goods /concealing goods -Perceptions around victim Vs criminal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Normalised Domestic violence -Female on female violence -victimisation of family members -Fear of repercussions of disclosures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Belonging -Acceptance -Creation of a new 'family' -Desire for recognition and status 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Financial need -Lack of alternatives to gang life -Lack of exit strategies/ clarity around support -Associated due to family affiliations

2.12.2 Synthesis Analysis

Each of the overarching themes will now be briefly discussed in turn.

2.12.2.1 Relationships: complex and controlling

This theme encompassed themes related to relationships with partners and peers, alongside sexual relationships. There was commonality across all studies around the significance of relationships as a factor within gangs.

The title 'complex and controlling' represents themes around manipulation by males within relationships, as numerous studies highlighted that often females felt controlled by male members of the gang (Beckett et al., 2013; Choak, 2018; Elliott, 2012; Firmin, 2010; Walter, 1999) and felt they were unable to have a relationship with others outside their local area (Choak, 2018; Elliott, 2012).

Relationships were experienced as exciting and dangerous by some women which led to females becoming affiliated (Firmin, 2010; The Centre for Social Justice & XLP, 2013; Walter, 1999). This theme also reflects that the females in some of the studies also reported that they felt that those females exposed to sexual violence and exploitation were blamed for causing their experiences (Beckett et al., 2013; Couper, 2016; Elliott, 2012; Firmin, 2010; The Centre for Social Justice & XLP, 2013; Walter, 1999).

2.12.2.2 Female roles

The role of females affiliated with gangs was discussed in all the studies. Across studies females reported that typically there were three main roles within the gang (Beckett et al., 2013; Choak, 2018; Elliott, 2012; Firmin, 2010; The Centre for Social Justice & XLP, 2013).

Females were typically either reported as a 'gangster girl', who was described as having masculine traits and being actively involved in the daily activities of the gang (Beckett et al., 2013; Choak, 2018; Elliott, 2012; The Centre for Social Justice & XLP, 2013); the sexualised female, who was described as having sexual relations with numerous men affiliated with the gang (Beckett et al., 2013; Choak, 2018; Firmin, 2010; The Centre for Social Justice & XLP, 2013) and females who were in long term relationships with a male affiliated with the gang, who would typically recruit other females and conceal goods for the gang (Beckett et al., 2013; Choak, 2018; Firmin, 2010; The Centre for Social Justice & XLP, 2013). Different names for these three roles were described including: 'wifey', 'link', 'gangster girl' but the main roles described were consistent (Beckett et al., 2013; Choak, 2018; Firmin, 2010; The Centre for Social Justice & XLP, 2013).

2.12.2.3 Criminality: Accessories

The role of females as accessories in criminal acts was also prevalent across studies (Choak, 2018; Couper, 2016; Elliott, 2012; Firmin, 2010; The Centre for Social Justice & XLP, 2013). Many females described being lookouts during criminal acts (Choak, 2018; Couper, 2016; Elliott, 2012; Firmin, 2010; The Centre for Social Justice & XLP, 2013), they also described concealing goods such as weapons and drugs on their person (Choak, 2018; Couper, 2016; Elliott, 2012; Firmin, 2010; The Centre for Social Justice & XLP, 2013). They also described storing goods in their homes (Choak, 2018; Couper, 2016; Elliott, 2012; Firmin, 2010; The Centre for Social Justice & XLP, 2013). Some studies also reported females being actively involved in drug dealing (Choak, 2018; Walter, 1999).

2.12.2.4 Fear

Another prominent theme within the included studies was fear, including fear of their partner (linked to domestic violence), fear of gang violence, fear of violence from other gangs and fear of the repercussions of reporting issues to the police, social services, or

professionals such as teachers, doctors etc. (Beckett et al., 2013; Couper, 2016; Elliott, 2012; Firmin, 2010; The Centre for Social Justice & XLP, 2013). Some of the females reported that violence within the home was normalised and part of being in a relationship with a gang member (Couper, 2016; Elliott, 2012; Firmin, 2010; The Centre for Social Justice & XLP, 2013).

Some females reported witnessing extreme levels of violence towards other people in the gang which led them to desistance (Couper, 2016; Elliott, 2012), alongside extreme violence against family members of other gangs such as rape, murder, and damaging property (Beckett et al., 2013; Choak, 2018; Couper, 2016; Elliott, 2012; Firmin, 2010; Walter, 1999). Extreme violence was described as a way of repaying or collecting a debt, or punishing an individual from another gang or their own gang (Firmin, 2010).

Many females also reported a high level of female-on-female violence and reported that females who displayed more masculine characteristics (Choak, 2018) were tasked with attacking females from other gangs (Beckett et al., 2013; Choak, 2018; Couper, 2016; Elliott, 2012; Firmin, 2010; Walter, 1999) or their own gang if individuals had been talking to professionals (Beckett et al., 2013; Choak, 2018; Couper, 2016; Elliott, 2012; Firmin, 2010; Walter, 1999).

2.12.2.5 Gang ‘family’

The theme of the creation of a gang ‘family’ was portrayed in many of the studies (Beckett et al., 2013; Choak, 2018; Couper, 2016; Elliott, 2012; Firmin, 2010; The Centre for Social Justice & XLP, 2013; Walter, 1999). The females reported feeling a sense of belonging (Couper, 2016; Elliott, 2012; Firmin, 2010; The Centre for Social Justice & XLP, 2013; Walter, 1999), acceptance (Firmin, 2010; The Centre for Social Justice & XLP, 2013; Walter, 1999), stability (Beckett et al., 2013; Choak, 2018; Elliott, 2012; Walter, 1999) and protection when affiliated with the gang. Some of the females highlighted that the gang gave them a sense of

connectedness and belonging that was missing from their family home (Beckett et al., 2013; Choak, 2018; Elliott, 2012; Walter, 1999).

Some females reported that being affiliated with the gang provided a sense of recognition and status that made them feel proud (Choak, 2018; Elliott, 2012; Firmin, 2010; The Centre for Social Justice & XLP, 2013). Some females suggested that this sense of belonging made them loyal to the gang (Choak, 2018; Elliott, 2012; Firmin, 2010; The Centre for Social Justice & XLP, 2013).

2.12.2.6 Self and society

This theme broadly incorporates a range of factors that were reported to contribute to females joining gangs and struggling to desist from gang affiliation. These relate to the individual themselves, societal demands and resources (Beckett et al., 2013; Choak, 2018; Couper, 2016; Elliott, 2012; Firmin, 2010; The Centre for Social Justice & XLP, 2013; Walter, 1999).

Many of the females in the studies reported becoming affiliated with the gang due to a lack of alternative options for employment (Beckett et al., 2013; Choak, 2018; Couper, 2016; Elliott, 2012; Firmin, 2010; Walter, 1999), relationships (Beckett et al., 2013; Choak, 2018; Couper, 2016; Elliott, 2012; Firmin, 2010; The Centre for Social Justice & XLP, 2013; Walter, 1999), or extra-curricular activities within their community (Choak, 2018; Couper, 2016; Elliott, 2012; Firmin, 2010; Walter, 1999).

Other females reported becoming affiliated due to family members already been affiliated (Beckett et al., 2013; Choak, 2018; Couper, 2016; Firmin, 2010; Walter, 1999) or due to financial pressures and gang activities providing an opportunity to get money relatively quickly (Beckett et al., 2013; Choak, 2018; Couper, 2016; Elliott, 2012; Firmin, 2010; Walter, 1999).

Some females suggested that they wished to sever their affiliations with the gang but felt unable to due to fears around their own or family members safety (Beckett et al., 2013; Choak, 2018; Couper, 2016; Elliott, 2012; Firmin, 2010; Walter, 1999) and reported that there were no safe places or people to talk to (Beckett et al., 2013; Choak, 2018; The Centre for Social Justice & XLP, 2013; Walter, 1999). It was also reported that to desist females often had to leave the geographical area of the gang (Firmin, 2010; The Centre for Social Justice & XLP, 2013).

2.13 Interpreting findings

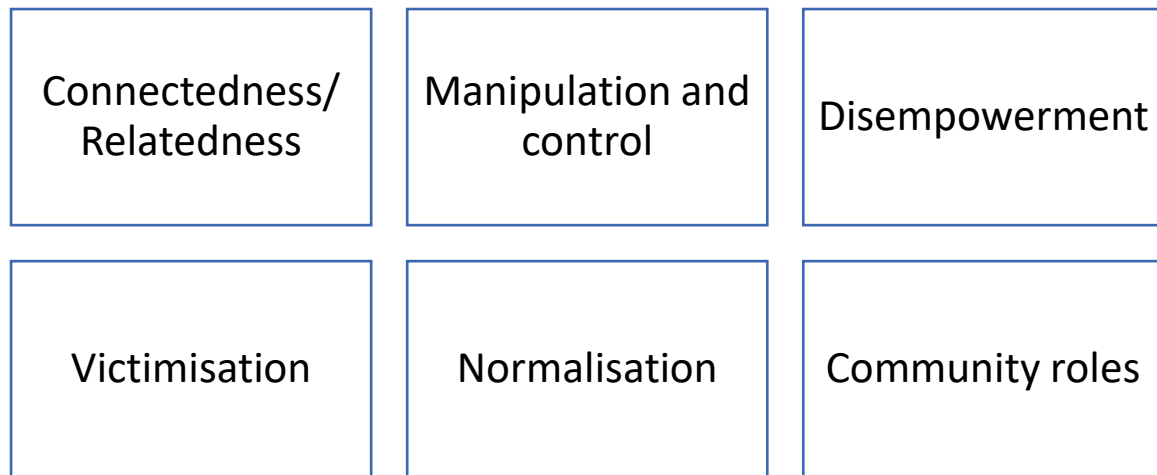
2.13.1 Developing third order interpretations

The synthesis of the papers selected generated overarching themes of:

- Relationships: complex and controlling
- Female roles
- Criminality: Accessories
- Fear
- Gang 'Family'
- Self and society

In line with the process of reciprocal translation analysis, the final phase involves developing third order interpretations. This phase involved reviewing patterns and themes to allow for cross study interpretations to be made. Interpretations of the current review are contained in Figure 6.

Figure 6: Third order interpretations



2.14 Overview of third order interpretation

The current studies reviewed highlighted that many women reported that their relationships within gangs were complex and controlling. It was interpreted that they were often subjected to manipulation and control by their male partners and peers, in the form of coercion through violence. This suggests that females affiliated with gang's experience high levels of victimisation and disempowerment both through their personal treatment and their exposure to adverse treatment of others when affiliated, such as through witnessing the abuse of others.

It was interpreted that women's affiliation with the gang was perceived initially as enhancing their connectedness and relatedness to others. They reported that their roles within the gang were mediated by their relationship status with the males in the gang and their perceived femininity. They suggested that stereotypical female characteristics were often linked to sexual or homemaker roles in the gang and stereotypical male characteristics were often linked to violent and criminal roles in the gang. Their roles in the gang also influenced their likelihood of victimisation and disempowerment as many of the females

expressed experiences of sexual assault being normalised for women in sexual and homemaker roles within the gang, and females being blamed by both males and females for causing their experiences of sexual assault. It was also reported that many females in gangs felt disempowered by males due to their stereotypical feminine characteristics and by their life choices. It was also interpreted that these experiences of victimisation and disempowerment were normalised, and that some of the women's experiences had been normalised by prior life experiences.

Many of the studies indicated that females sustained their affiliation due to feelings of connectedness and relatedness with the gang, as many of the females likened the gang to a 'family'. It was also suggested that the gang played a community role with many women reporting that the gang was a presence in the community and they also indicated affiliations with gangs due to family associations, a perceived lack of alternative methods of forming relationships, gaining financial income, or occupying their time within their geographical area. Therefore, suggesting that the community environment may influence gang affiliation.

2.14.1 Link to Theoretical insights

This synthesis of findings was considered in the context of existing theoretical insights.

The notion of females becoming affiliated and maintaining involvement with gangs due to their relationships with peers and partners, alongside providing a sense of a gang 'family' draws upon the theoretical insights. Theories such as Social Control Theory (Hirschi, 1969) and the Adjusted Unified Theory (Mozova, 2017) suggest that factors such as group unity, belonging and stability have been associated with gang affiliation.

Additionally, females mentioned becoming affiliated with the gang due to a lack of other alternatives, in terms of financial gain, relationships and community activity. These factors

link to the social cognition, peer selection and opportunities sections of the Adjusted Unified Theory (Mozova, 2017). Furthermore, linking in with Unified theory (Alleyne & Wood, 2010) and the Adjusted Unified Theory (Mozova, 2017), this may suggest that young people may develop a favourable perception of opportunities associated with gang affiliation, such as social belonging, social acceptance, social status, protection and financial security that they perceive to be 'impossible' via other methods.

2.15 Appraisal

2.15.1 Establishing plausibility

Major and Savin-Baden's (2010) guidelines for establishing plausibility of a quantitative synthesis were used to appraise the quality of the studies. All the studies provided a rich description of the data collected and as most of the studies were doctoral theses, they provided a clear outline of the methodological approach undertaken, alongside the positioning of the researcher within the data.

In consideration of the 'validity' of the synthesis, several recommended strategies were upheld within this review.

Table 5: Application of the strategies to establish trustworthiness (Major & Savin-Baden, 2010)

Strategy	Application in current research
Conceptual framing	Synthesis interpretation considered within context of existing theory
Dense description of context	Description of studies' contexts provided
Dense description of findings	See Themes Table 4 (Appendix C)
Dense description of methods	Description of study methods provided
Experience over time	Longitudinal review attempted: no time limit placed on systematic search
Researcher positionality	Use of reflective research diary

Regarding the 'validity' of the synthesis, the current review attempted to provide 'credibility' through presenting a transparent account of the findings from a range of studies.

In terms of 'transferability', the findings from these studies suggest that there are some commonalities between studies.

Regarding 'dependability', this has been attempted through providing contextual information for each study. It is acknowledged that due to the interpretive nature of this synthesis there are difficulties around the 'confirmability' of the findings.

2.15.2 Critiques of research synthesis

It is acknowledged that this review was conducted by one researcher, therefore their biases, experiences and views have influenced the review process and subsequent interpretations through processes of personal and epistemological reflexivity (Willig, 2001). It is also

acknowledged that the extent of publication bias is unclear, due to the small number of studies included in this review.

2.16 Rationale for the current study

2.16.1 Summary of current literature

Current theories and research looking at the factors involved in joining gangs, maintaining affiliations and desistance from gangs have been focused on the male perspective, both as participants and researchers.

There are few studies in the UK that explicitly explore the experiences of females affiliated and there is often a lack of female voice within these studies. Current research synthesised within the systematic literature review highlights that females do play a role in gangs within the UK.

The current systematic review highlights that there is a need to explore the experiences of females across different geographical areas of the UK as often the research has been conducted in London. The systematic review also indicated that there is a lack of research exploring the perceptions of females in relation to their experiences, motivations, and perceptions of joining gangs, their relationships in gangs and how desistance from gangs is achieved.

Southgate (2011) highlights there is currently a lack of understanding around the factors that may lead to female gang affiliation, activity, and desistance. Therefore, Community and statutory services offering support are often informed by male dominated research, which may result in females judging support services as less relevant, engaging, or appropriate to meet their needs and concerns. There is therefore a need for female gang affiliation to be explored, to help inform understanding, theory, and provision. Additionally,

it would be beneficial to explore community services and factors that may support their desistance or act as protective factors against gang affiliation.

2.16.2 Objectives and unique contribution of the current study

In line with findings of the Systemic Literature Review, it was judged that within the context of females affiliated with gangs in the UK, there was a clear need to explore perceptions and experiences across different geographical areas.

Existing literature outlines that there is research exploring the factors that may lead to females joining gangs, however the role of female's relationships with males and females in the gang linking to affiliation and sustained roles in the gang has not been previously explored. Further exploration around desistance for females in the UK affiliated with gangs has also not been explored. It was felt that it is important to gain further insight into females' personal experiences in gangs to strengthen understanding and knowledge in this domain. Table 6 outlines the process of devising a research question based on these gaps in the literature.

This rationale provides the focus for the current proposed research. The aim is to undertake a qualitative exploration of female gang affiliation, with the purpose of exploring how females who have been previously affiliated with gangs perceive their experiences within gangs in terms of joining, their relationships and desistance from the gang.

Table 6: Research Question Development

Research questions considered during the early stages of the research process	Final question:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the impact of race, ethnicity, and culture on female affiliation in gangs? • What are female's experiences of relationships with other females and males in the stages of joining and sustaining gang affiliation? • What are females' experiences and perspectives of services available for females affiliated with gangs? • What are the protective factors within the community that may reduce gang membership among females? • How is desistance achieved from gang affiliation for females? • What are females' experiences of joining gangs across different UK geographical domains? 	<p>RQ: What are the perceptions of females formally affiliated with gangs, of their experiences within gangs, in relation to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>joining</u> gangs? • <u>relationships</u> in gangs? • <u>desisting</u> from the gang?

2.16.3 Research questions

The research question for the current study is:

What are the perceptions of females formerly affiliated with gangs, of their experiences within gangs, in relation to:

- a. joining gangs?*
- b. relationships in gangs?*
- c. desisting from the gang?*

3. Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction to Methodology

Within this chapter, the researcher aims to present an overview and rationale for the chosen methodology to address the study's aims and questions. The theoretical underpinnings and characteristics of a thematic analysis methodology will be considered and the rationale for selecting this methodology discussed. Participant selection and recruitment criteria are described, alongside the ethical considerations of the research, data collection and analysis procedures. In the interest of presenting high quality research, the trustworthiness and dependability of the data is considered. Finally, the chapter is concluded with a summary of the current methodology.

3.2 Research Questions

The research question for the current study is:

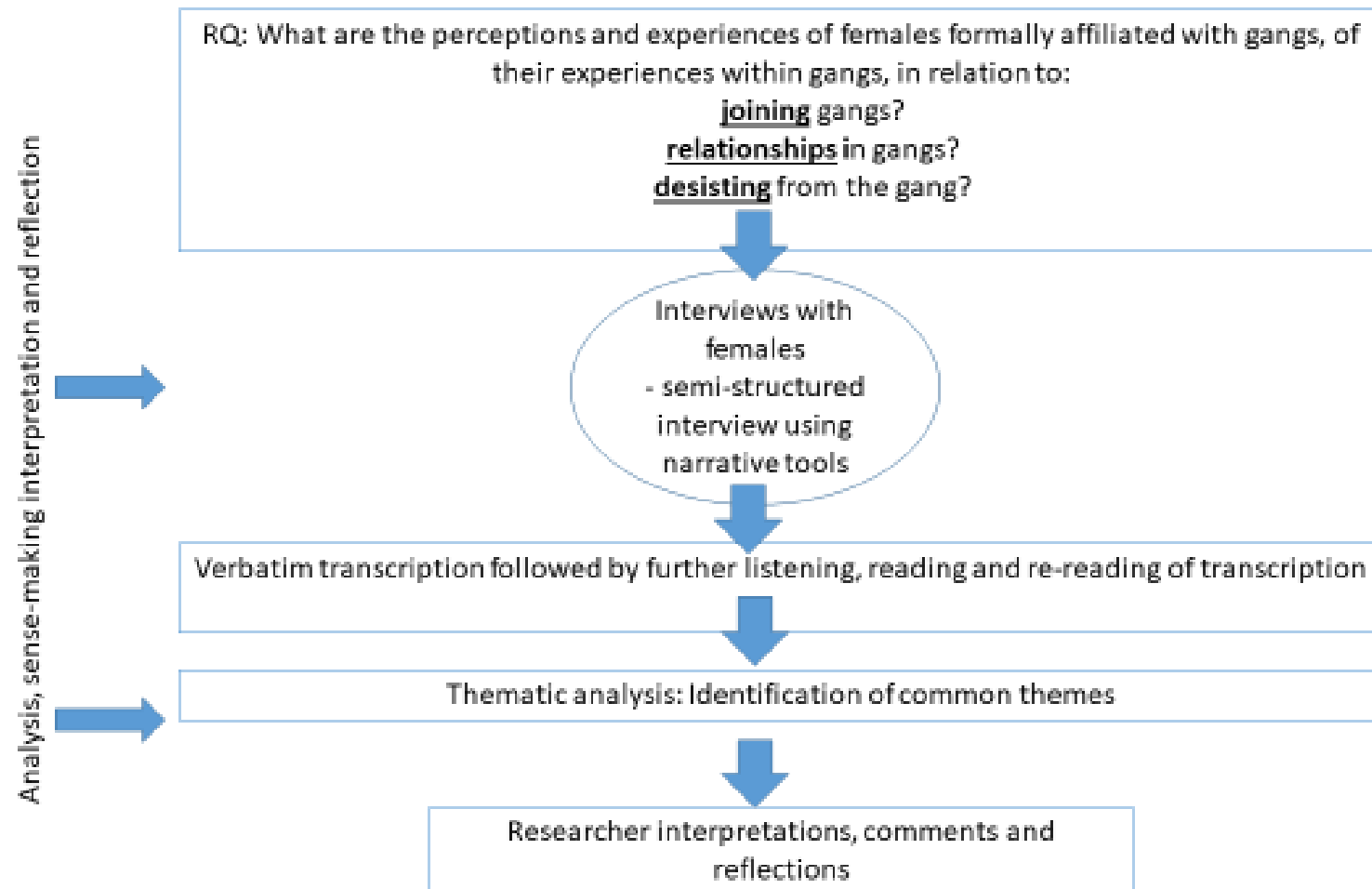
What are the perceptions of females formerly affiliated with gangs, of their experiences within gangs, in relation to:

- a. their perceptions and experiences of joining gangs?*

- b. their perceptions and experiences of relationships in gangs?*
- c. their perceptions and experiences of desisting from the gang?*

See figure 7 for an overview of how the research questions have been addressed.

Figure 7: Map of strategies used to address the research question



3.3 Methodological orientation

3.3.1 Ontology

Ontology relates to theories of reality, in relation to the nature of reality or being (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Researchers make assumptions regarding the nature of reality and therefore their ontological stance influences how the knowledge generated in the research (epistemology) is viewed.

3.3.1.1 Realism

A Realist ontology suggests that there is a truth or knowable reality in the world. Lincoln and Guba, (1985) suggest that often research in the scientific community has a Realist ontology as the researcher's purpose is to find out the nature of reality.

3.3.1.2 Critical Realism

Critical realism combines ontological realism (the notion that there is a reality that exists independently of the researcher) and epistemological relativism (the researcher is an active participant in the process of creating understanding of external reality) and therefore acknowledges that human perception of external reality is shaped by individual experiences and values (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Warner et al., 2016). Critical realism therefore suggests that there is a reality existing independently of the researcher but individuals conceptualise different perspectives of this "truth" and offer differing perspectives based upon their lived context.

3.3.1.3 Relativism

Relativism conceptualises reality (ontology) as the product of human context: action and interaction, therefore there is no objective truth to be sought.

3.3.1.4 (Post) positivism

Linking with a realist ontology, Positivism or (post)positivism assumes that there is an objective truth or reality and that it is possible to generate objective knowledge (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Positivist epistemology assumes that the researcher is separate to the knowledge generated and can investigate the world without influencing it (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

(Post) positivism is a refinement on traditional Positivism to emphasise that the goal is to gain objective truth, however it acknowledges that observation is imperfect and can be influenced by the researchers' values and cultural orientation (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Gaining objectivity and objective truth is the aim, and various methods are used to reduce subjectivity in observations.

3.3.1.5 Ontological position in this research

Within this current study, a Critical Realism theoretical perspective was adopted because the researcher believes that reality exists independent of our ideas about it, but our experiences and understanding of that reality is mediated by language, culture and personal experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

3.3.2 Epistemology: Theories of Knowledge

Epistemology relates to theories of knowledge, theorising what it is possible to know and how knowledge is generated (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Braun and Clarke (2022) state that “Epistemological positions reflect assumptions around what constitutes meaningful and valid knowledge” (p.175). Epistemological positioning broadly aligns with the ontological positions of realism, critical realism, and relativism.

3.3.2.1 Contextualism

Contextualism suggests that knowledge is generated by an individual and is shaped by their context, and therefore cannot be separated from the human or their context (Tebes, 2005). Therefore, multiple accounts of reality are possible (Madhill et al., 2000).

This epistemological stance assumes that the knowledge generated in research is shaped by the interactions between the researcher and participant, and that meaning is co-produced and shaped by their values and practices (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Therefore, researcher’s reflexivity is important to ensure that the researchers role in shaping meaning is explicit to their reader (Madhill et al., 2000).

3.3.2.2 Pragmatism

Pragmatism recognises the existence of a singular truth or reality, which is interpreted by individuals. This paradigm suggests that methods used for data generation and analysis are matched to the specific research questions and purpose of the study.

3.3.2.3 Constructionism

Within the Constructionism paradigm, knowledge is viewed as actively constructed in the minds of individuals, rather than there being a singular objective truth (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This paradigm places emphasis upon eliciting multiple meanings attributed to events experienced by individuals, and eliciting their personal truths (Elliot, 2005). It is acknowledged that their personal truth is influenced by their social, cultural, and historical experiences and these factors influence how events are processed, understood and interpreted (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Within Constructionism language is viewed as constructing knowledge. Therefore, analysis and exploration of the language used is viewed as reflecting the knowledge constructed by the individual. Constructionism assumes that language is used intentionally to convey the individual's reality and therefore language can be analysed to explore their truth (Naples et al., 2014).

Furthermore, the role of the researcher is deemed crucial within this paradigm, as the link between the participant and the researcher is interactive (Mertens, 2014), whereby the researcher provides their own interpretation of the constructions formed by participants (Schwandt, 1994). Additionally, the environmental factors in which an individual's narrative is reconstructed is influenced by the social context in which it is formed and the audience who receives it (Ward, 2012).

3.3.2.4 Transformative

The Transformative epistemological paradigm assumes that objective truth is determined and defined through a cultural lens. This paradigm acknowledges the interaction between the researcher and individual and highlights that power within research should be balanced to ensure that the voices of marginalised individuals are elevated (Mertens, 2010).

Typically, research adopting a transformative epistemological stance captures the views of diverse and traditionally marginalised groups. Research often aims to analyse how and why inequality is reflected in society through social inquiry to develop a program theory (a set of beliefs regarding how and why this problem occurs) (Mertens, 2010).

3.3.2.5 Epistemological stance within the current study

A Contextualist epistemology was adopted to acknowledge that human perception of the ‘truth’ is shaped by individual experiences and values (Braun & Clarke, 2022), alongside the experiences and values of the researcher.

The researcher is undertaking experiential research, whereby language is viewed as a tool for expression and communicating meaning. Language is viewed as a reflection of the thoughts, feelings, and beliefs of the individual. It is assumed that reality exists independent of the language used and that language is a tool in which this reality is revealed.

Within this current study, the research aims to explore the individual’s perceptions around their experiences affiliated with gangs; therefore, it is experiential research as opposed to critical research. It is acknowledged that objective truth is impossible to capture, and that knowledge is shaped by context such as the individual’s experiences and values, alongside the values and experiences of the researcher. Therefore researcher reflexivity is crucial in providing transparency in their analysis of the data (Madhill et al., 2000).

It is acknowledged that the researcher’s epistemological stance could be viewed as consistent with the transformative epistemological paradigm, because the research aims to gain the views of marginalised and powerless groups from an advocacy research position. However, the Critical Realism ontology/ Contextualist epistemology was deemed more consistent with the research aims because within the current study the aim was to explore

perceptions held by females rather than to use transformative theory to explore social inquiry and develop program theory to generate social transformation (Mertens , 2014).

3.3.3 Qualitative research

In line with the research questions the qualitative paradigm of research was adopted as the researcher is focused on gaining rich data to explore the meaning given to females perceived experiences.

When planning this research, the researcher considered a range of qualitative methodologies (see Table 7), exploring their strengths and limitations in relation to the research question and aims. It was concluded that a Reflexive Thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2022) was most aligned with this study, which is explored in the next section.

After considering a range of qualitative methodologies (Table 7), reflexive thematic analysis was deemed to be the most appropriate methodology because it would enable the experiences of females to be explored collectively to generate themes across the three research questions, whereas other methodologies focused on individual experiences or the language chosen. This methodology was aligned with the epistemological stance of the researcher and their view that language is a method of conveying views and opinions, rather than requiring the exploration of underlying meanings. The notion of the methodology focusing on reflexivity is also important considering the researcher's epistemological stance and acknowledging the influence the researcher has on the data generated. The researcher also felt that there was significantly more guidance around the process required for this methodology compared to other possible methods at the time of writing (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Table 7: Evaluation of alternative methodologies considered

Methodology	Interpretive Phenomenological analysis (IPA)	Ethnography	Grounded Theory	Discourse Analysis
Distinguishing features	Focus on participants lived experiences Collects participants subjective accounts	The researcher is immersed in the research (e.g. through participant observations). The focus of the analysis is a group of individuals who share similar beliefs and behaviours, within a given context.	Focus on theory development which evolves during the course of the research.	Focuses upon understanding the participants use of language
Strengths in relation to this research	Appropriate for homogeneous samples (females affiliated with gangs) Aims to understand the meanings individual participants give to events and experiences	Through the researcher becoming immersed in the lives of the participants, enhanced rapport and further in-depth information around the contextual factors affecting their experiences and accounts could be gained.	Theories relating to female affiliation and desistence in gangs are sparse.	Analysing the meaning of participant's choice and use of language could provide deeper insights into their experiences and the impact of the wider sociocultural context.

Limitations in relation to this research	This methodology was considered for this research, however this study aimed to generate deeper insight into the shared experiences of females in the UK, to provide implications and next steps for a range of stakeholders.	This methodology would not have been practical or ethical given the remit of this study.	Large sample sizes are required to identify patterns of action. The aim of this research study is to understand experiences, rather than develop theory. Concerns around recruiting a large sample of participants in this field was raised.	The focus of the research surrounds understanding the participant's perceptions around the experiences and events influencing joining, affiliation and desistence, rather than the nuances of the language used.
---	--	--	--	--

3.4 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is a method of developing, analysing, and interpreting patterns in data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Thematic analysis is the term used to incorporate numerous different approaches to reduce qualitative data into “themes”.

The thematic analysis method adopted should be driven by the research questions and is useful to analyse subjective information such as individual experiences, views, or opinions.

There are various overarching approaches to thematic analysis, these include:

- An inductive approach. This involves deriving meaning from the data set without preconceptions around what themes will be generated.
- A deductive approach. This involves analysing the data set through a pre-constructed lens based on prior information, research, and theory. Therefore, the data analysis is shaped by preconceived expectations around the themes that will be generated.
- Sematic analysis. This approach to analysis aims to identify themes based on the overtly stated information provided from the data.
- Latent analysis. This approach focuses on exploring the underlying meanings interpreted by the researcher from the data.

There are 3 main types of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022): Coding reliability thematic analysis, codebook thematic analysis and reflexive thematic analysis.

Codebook thematic analysis utilises a structured coding approach (Braun & Clarke, 2022). A set of codes are predetermined before data analysis through a deductive approach, and then applied to the data. Themes are typically called analytic inputs and the analysis process

involves allocating data to the pre-determined themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This approach is typically used for large qualitative data sets and can be used when there are multiple coders in the research team.

Coding reliability thematic analysis is typically used when the research project has multiple coders, generating codes from the data set (Boyatzid, 1998). Codebooks are typically used whereby research teams agree on the codes used which enhances intercoder reliability within the team.

Reflexive thematic analysis is described as the most theoretically flexible method out of the three discussed, as it doesn't use a codebook and involves generating codes at the latter stages of the analysis process. It allows for the researcher to adapt, add, and remove codes as they increase their familiarity with the data. This approach is shaped by the epistemological and ontological paradigm adopted by the researcher. It can be used inductively or deductively and where the analysis focus is semantic or latent. Typically, when adopting this approach to thematic analysis, the reflexivity of the research is evident throughout, some researchers use of a reflective research log or diary to aid this process (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

3.4.1 Thematic analysis approach within the current study

This research looks to explore the perceptions of females around their experiences and focuses on generating the semantics of meaning (surface level exploration), rather than exploring the latent meanings underpinning their narratives, in keeping with the ontological and epistemological stance adopted.

Reflexive thematic analysis has been used in this research, as this analysis method allows for a flexible approach to analysis to be adopted and is suited to inductive analysis. The

researcher has adopted a Critical realism ontology and Contextualism epistemology, therefore reflexive thematic analysis was viewed as the approach most consistent with this paradigm. This is because it recognises the position of the researcher in generating and analysing the data and the influence and impact they have on this process.

The researcher has adopted an inductive, semantic analysis approach to the data orientation and analysis, whereby the codes and themes generated are driven by the data gained from semi structured interviews. However, codes were generated around each research question, which was derived from gaps in previous literature, therefore generating themes had a deductive orientation.

In terms of reflexivity, the researcher aimed to reflect through the process on:

- How their personal values and experiences shaped their interpretations of the knowledge through the knowledge generation and analysis process.
- How their method and the questions used in interviews shaped the knowledge that was produced.
- How previous knowledge gained from the literature review shaped knowledge production, alongside previous knowledge from cultural and social sources shape perceptions around gang affiliation.

These reflections are captured in a reflective journal (Braun & Clarke, 2022) and displayed as part of the analysis process (Appendix D).

3.5 Data generation methods

3.5.1 Interviews

Interviews are commonly used in qualitative data collection to gain highly personalised information. This typically involves the interviewer or researcher asking the interviewee a

series of questions to elicit information about a chosen topic (Elliot, 2005). The interview could be structured or unstructured depending on if the questions posed are pre-determined. The interview could consist of a range of closed and open questions.

Elliot (2005) reports that fewer questions and less structure within the interview is beneficial to ensure that the participant controls what is said, when it is said and how it is said. It is suggested that to enhance the richness of data generated interview questions should be open, linguistically simple, free of jargon and related to the experiences recalled by the participants (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000; Elliot, 2005).

3.5.2 Semi structured interviews

A semi-structure interview style aims to incorporate predetermined questions based on the research questions but allows for questions to be generated in a flexible manner based on the responses provided by the interviewee.

Often in experiential research a semi structured interview approach is adopted because it is acknowledged that often recalling an individual's experiences in an unstructured interview style could be deemed overwhelming, particularly if they have experienced events that are perceived to be traumatic (Atkinson, 1998; Elliot, 2005). Therefore, a semi-structured approach is adopted whereby interview schedules are used as a flexible guide to aid the researcher in eliciting the participants experiences (Atkinson, 1998).

3.5.3 Focus groups

A focus group is a method whereby the researcher conducts a collective interview with a larger group of people (typically six to eight people) to gain their views on a particular topic (Lavrakas, 2008). Focus groups aim to create a dynamic interactive between the participants

in the group to gain an insight into people's thoughts and feelings. Often focus groups are used to provide an insight on an issue from numerous participants that would not be possible via other methods such as 1-1 interviews (Nyumba et al., 2018). Within focus groups, the researcher adopts a facilitator or moderator role to support discussions around a topic (Nyumba et al., 2018).

3.5.4 Survey

A survey method is often used to allow for data to be captured from a large population (Oppenheim, 1998). Qualitative surveys often use a range of open questions to generate written views, opinions, or narratives around a particular topic. Often the survey is generated by the researcher and completed by the participant independently (Jansen, 2010).

3.5.5 Current data generation method

Within this research to gain rich detail about individual experiences, a semi-structured narrative interview approach was believed to be appropriate because:

- Semi-structured narrative interviews allow for individual experiences to be captured and explored. Josselson (2011) and Murray (2015) suggest that often narrative interviews are used to allow participants to share their personal accounts as they allow for flexibility in relation to the content, structure, and duration of the discussion, which may not be possible with focus groups and surveys
- Individual narrative accounts can highlight the perceived factors and transitions within a person's life, which may be significant in exploring gang affiliation and separation from the group.
- Semi-structured interviews allow for the researcher to ensure that the research questions are being explored using an interview schedule, whilst also enabling the participant to explore the life events that they deem significant

- Semi-structured interviews allow for the exploration of sensitive topics which may evoke discussions around challenging life experiences. The navigation of these topics requires careful exploration and support by the researcher. This would not be appropriate using a focus group or survey approach.

3.6. Recruitment, participant selection and contextual information

3.6.1 Recruitment

The researcher was aware that recruitment of participants for this study may be challenging.

Initially, the researcher identified a local community providers meeting, where community and local authority groups who provided support for young people in the community met monthly to discuss local matters. The researcher attended this meeting and presented the research proposal and asked the professionals present if they are aware of any females who may meet the inclusion criteria (see 3.6.2). This yielded the interest of one community provider who offered bespoke support for women involved or at risk of gang affiliation, and the manager identified 3 suitable participants who were willing to speak with the researcher. The manager of this community group was also consulted in the creation of the interview schedule as she had prior gang affiliation (see 3.6.3.1).

To ensure that the participant sample presented experiences from a broad range of geographical locations, other community providers across the UK were contacted. The contact details of these community providers were gained through internet browser searches alongside consultations with individuals who have researched in this field. Contact with additional community organisations supporting females resulted in 2 further suitable participants being identified and interviewed. Many organisations contacted stated that they had worked with females meeting the inclusion criteria but were unwilling to make contact as their direct work had ceased, and they wanted to support the females 'fresh start'.

In addition to this, an application to conduct research in Her Majesty's Prison and Probation service (HMPPS) was submitted. However, the application was declined as it was felt that at this time the research question didn't align with HMPPS priorities and concerns were raised around the levels of aftercare the prison service could offer post interview during the covid-19 pandemic.

3.6.1.1 Final sample

The final sample consisted of 5 females aged between 24 years old and 29 years old (see table 8) from across the UK. Owing to the difficulties accessing participants the sample was achieved initially using opportunity sampling through several gatekeepers (community providers, senior researchers and HMPPs) and then a snowball sampling method following initial interviews with females.

All the females interviewed had desisted from gang affiliation for at least 4 years and had experienced positive life events after desistance.

3.6.2 Participant sampling criteria

Inclusion and exclusion sampling criteria were used during the recruitment process and were amended during the research process.

The initial Inclusion criteria stated that the participants had to:

- Identify as female
- Be aged between 18 and 22 years
- Be a UK citizen
- Have experience of gang affiliation in the UK
- Self-identify as having previous gang affiliation for over 6 months.
- Have not been actively involved in gang related activities for 6 months prior to their involvement in this research

The exclusion criteria excluded:

- Females with significant communication needs or a lack of verbal English language knowledge which may prevent them from expressing their views.
- Participants experiencing high levels of mental distress or turbulence at that time in their life were excluded from the study.

Originally the researcher aimed to obtain a purposive sample of 5-8 participants identified by the Community Providers consulted. Following recruitment attempts and reflections shared by some of Community Providers, it was felt that gang affiliation was often still prevalent for females aged 18 to 22 years. Therefore, some females may not have desisted from gang affiliation at this age or if they had, may not feel willing to reflect on their experiences at this point in their lives.

Within the final inclusion criteria, the age criteria was extended to included females from 18 – 30 years as it was felt that at age 30, females would be able to provide an accurate account of their perceived experiences if these experiences occurred in adolescence. Widening the sample further (30+ years old) would possibly offer a retrospective account from possibly 15+ years previously, in which their perceptions may be altered due to recall issues and shifts in narratives over time.

It was felt as the females experienced more time away from gang affiliation, they may feel more able to discuss their experiences, reflect on their experiences and offer introspection.

It was also felt that widening the age range may capture the diversity of gang experiences and offer perspectives around gang affiliation in both childhood and adulthood.

3.6.3 Semi structured narrative interviews

The interview structure in this study focused on encouraging the females interviewed to tell their stories or narratives related to their experiences affiliated with gangs. Narrative tools

(see 3.6.3.2) and an interview schedule (see 3.6.3.1) were used within the semi-structured interview to aid their story telling to gain further exploration into the experiences of the females interviewed. It was felt that approaching data gathering through a story telling structure would be beneficial as telling stories is a very human interaction style and stories can provide insight into the interacting, wider systemic factors surrounding an individual (McAdams, 2005).

Within the research, participants were asked to recall stories relating to key points in their lives: joining a gang, being affiliated with a gang, and leaving a gang. This helped to form a narrative around their perceived experiences affiliated with gangs. Participants were also asked to recall experiences prior to their affiliation and post affiliation if appropriate.

3.6.3.1 Developing the interview schedule

Interview schedules aim to provide prompts and questions that can be used by the researcher. The questions included in the interview schedule were influenced by Atkinson, (1998) and McAdams, (1993) suggested life interview content. The questions were chronologically grouped covering joining, gang experiences and desistence, but also aimed to capture the individual's personal journey. This included: family background, education, life memories, present and future aspirations.

The questions in the draft interview schedule were developed from literature around female gang affiliation and the research reviewed in the systematic literature review (Firmin, 2010; Beckett et al., 2013; Choak, 2018; Couper, 2016; Elliott, 2012; The Centre for Social Justice & XLP, 2013; Walter, 1999).

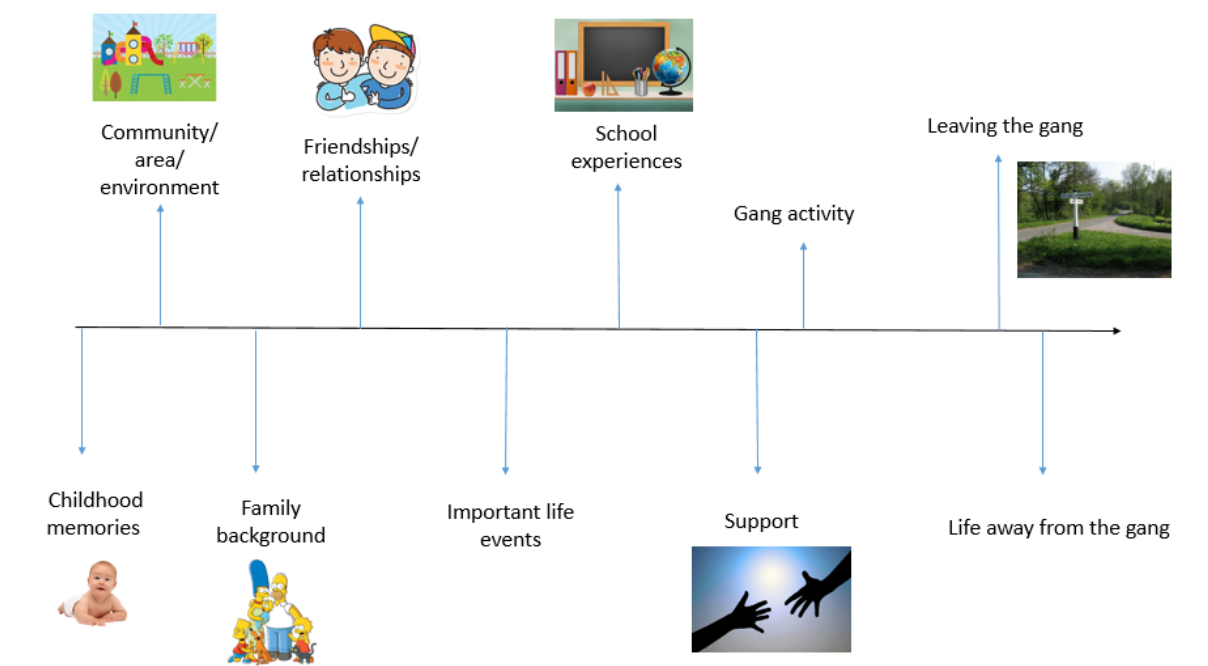
Once a rough interview schedule was created, the researcher met with the manager of a community organisation that supports females who are at risk of/or involved in gang affiliation and reviewed the questions (see Appendix E). This community stakeholder had

personal experience of being affiliated with a gang but did not meet the inclusion criteria due to her age exceeding 30 years old. By consulting with her, further questions were added, and question wording was amended to aid exploration of the participant's experiences. This allowed the researcher to reflectively explore the interview questions used to ensure they were appropriate for the sample and reflected the research questions. It was felt that consulting an individual with prior experience of gang affiliation was important, as the researcher had no prior involvement in this group and wished to ensure that the language and questions used were appropriate and aided discussions.

3.6.3.2 Narrative tools

Within the interview, Elliot (2005) highlights the benefit of using a visual template to map key events such as a timeline, which may be supplemented by conversation or memory aids such as photos, records or memory boxes (Creswell, 2007). Within this research, a visual timeline was used as a narrative tool to aid the recall of information (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Narrative timeline tool to aid participants story telling



3.6.3.3 Fieldwork testing

A pilot interview using the interview schedule and the visual timeline narrative tool was conducted via Microsoft Teams. This was done to ensure that the data generated was of significant quality and provided useful and meaningful data in relation to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Due to the perceived success of this interview (both the process and the outcomes), no significant adaptations were made to the questions and the data was included in the final study.

3.7 Data collection Procedure: methods and tools

3.7.1 Interview procedure

Interviews lasted approximately 1 hour, with interviews ranging between 40 minutes and 1 hour and 15 minutes.

Within the interview, the researcher aimed to actively listen to their stories, be non-judgemental in verbal and non-verbal responses and provide a space where they could share their experiences without interruption as they wished (Elliot, 2005).

The content and questions used in each interview varied, and a range of questions from the interview schedule alongside supplementary questions were used to aid explorations, gain clarification, and support reflection.

Table 8: Participant information

Participant pseudonyms	Age at interview (years: months)	Interview location	Ethnicity	Age of affiliation	Geographical area of affiliation	Period of desistance
1 - Sophie	28:2	On Microsoft Teams	White British	16 years old	Southeast	4 years
2 - Faith	24:11	On Microsoft Teams	White British	12 years old	West Midlands	9 years
3 - Simran	27:5	On Microsoft Teams	Mixed: Pakistani/ White British	12 years old	West Midlands	10 years
4 – Joy	24:8	On Microsoft Teams	Mixed: White British and Black Caribbean	13 years old	West Midlands	6 years
5 – Maria	29:0	In person (Private room in a local community centre)	White British	12 years old	South central	14 years

3.7.2 Method of analysis

3.7.2.1 Transcription

Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed soon after the interviews and included the words of both the researcher and interviewee (Appendix F). It was viewed that further detail such as pauses, emphasis and exclamations within the transcriptions would not offer significant relevance for the research questions.

The first stage of analysis involved reading the transcriptions and listening to the original audio recordings to ensure that the written transcriptions were representative of the data collected (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.8 Reflexive Thematic analysis

Reflexive Thematic analysis is a thematic analysis methodology, whereby themes are extracted from the data and the researcher is involved in critically interrogating their subjectivity and influence of the themes generated (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

The ontological and epistemological stance for this study was Critical realism and Contextualism, therefore the researcher assumed that the language used in the interviews reflected the semantics of the individual's perceptions. The researcher was aware of their relationship in generating and influencing the narratives captured, and how their values and experiences would contribute to both the questions asked in the interviews and their interpretation of the data. It is important that the researcher was reflective of their own subjectivity through the research process and how this impacted on the data gathered and presented (Appendix D).

It is also acknowledged that analytical interpretation and data generation is impacted by the power structures in the research and wider society. Within this research, the researcher was viewed as having more power in the relationship than the participant, due to her status as a researcher, white, middle-class background, and educational background. These factors were reflected on throughout the data generation and analysis and attempts to minimise these influences was undertaken. This included the participant choosing the venue for the interview, the researcher attending the interview in casual clothing, using narrative tools to aid storytelling and communication via the interview being conducted in the preferred way of the participant (telephone or email).

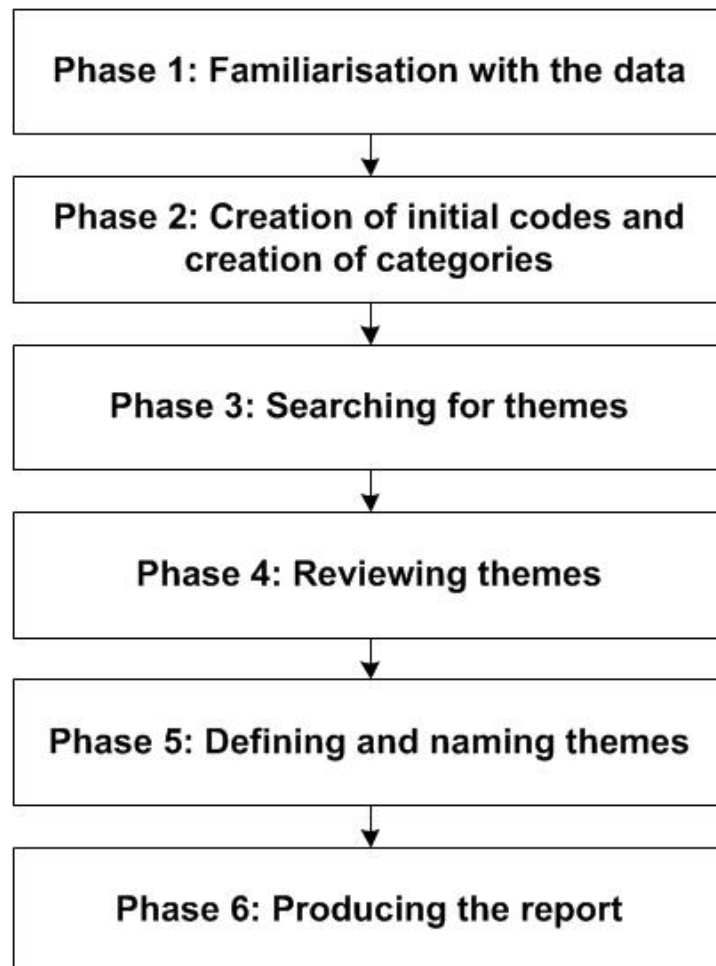
3.8.1 The process of reflexive thematic analysis

Each participant's narrative transcription was converted into themes through a process of successive inductive narrative analysis. The Braun and Clarke (2006) reflective thematic analysis procedure was used, and the process is outlined in Figure 9.

The coding process was done inductively and the three research questions operated deductively to generate themes specific to each research question, looking at:

- a. their perceptions and experiences of joining gangs?
- b. their perceptions and experiences of relationships in gangs?
- c. their perceptions and experiences of desisting from the gang?

Figure 9: The Braun and Clarke (2006) procedure for conducting reflexive thematic analysis



Phase 1: Familiarising yourself with the dataset

After transcription had occurred, the researcher re-read the data set numerous times and made reflective notes surrounding any analytical insights that may have arisen during reading (Appendix G). This process allows the researcher to become immersed in the data and to have a deeper familiarity with the data gathered.

The participants were contacted, and copies of the transcribed interviews were presented back to ensure that they accurately represented the narratives of the females interviewed. Two out of the five participants wished to view their transcripts and no changes were made to the transcripts.

Phase 2: Coding

The coding process involved the researcher inductively identifying segments of the data. Coding is described as the process of exploring the patterns and involves capturing repetition of meaning across the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2022). It is a subjective process, whereby the researcher interpreted the dataset to make meaning (Appendix G).

A code is the output of the coding process as it captures a meaning or concept associated with a segment of the dataset. Codes are given code labels that are succinct, summary phrases attached to a segment of data. These codes aimed to capture the semantic, surface meaning of the data generated by individuals and viewed language as a tool of communication and captured explicitly stated ideas.

The coding process was conducted using NVivo software, a qualitative data analysis software used to aid data management and analysis.

The coding process was done inductively, and two rounds of coding were utilised to capture evolutions in the codes and coding labels (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This ensured that segments generated analytically meaningful codes and coding labels.

Phase 3: Generating initial themes

Once codes were generated, the researcher aimed to identify shared pattern meaning across the data. This involved creating clusters of codes that shared a core idea or concept in relation to the research question. These themes were constructed by the researcher based on the data but had a deductive orientation as codes were clustered in relation to each of the three research questions (Appendix G).

The researcher also generated themes with acknowledgement of the knowledge of the topic formed from the literature review and the researcher's own values and experiences created a subjective interpretation of the data.

Once themes were generated, all the codes relating to that theme were compiled to generate Candidate themes. Candidate themes were checked against the coded data and checked against the dataset to ensure that they captured the dataset (Appendix G).

Phase 4: Developing and reviewing themes

This process involved the researcher checking that themes made sense in relation to the codes generated. For themes that did not capture the dataset accurately, revisions were made by collapsing candidate themes, discarding themes, and generating new themes.

Phase 5: Refining, defining, and naming themes

To help the refinement of themes this process involved the researcher providing names for the themes that reflected the meaning generated from the dataset (Appendix G).

Additionally, to ensure accurate and reliable theme labelling, the researcher consulted other researchers from the researchers' data analysis group to ensure the thematic labels were representative of the codes generated by way of sense checking. This was done by the researcher presenting clusters of codes to fellow Trainee Educational Psychologist researchers who were 'blind' to the topic area and research questions. They were asked to provide a thematic label based on the codes presented, which ensured that the theme accurately and convincingly described the pattern of shared meaning related to the dataset.

Phase 6: Writing up

Writing up is a key part of the analytical process for Reflective Thematic analysis as this process involved creating a coherent and persuasive story about the dataset, acknowledging the reflections and role of the researcher, and using vivid data extracts to compellingly present themes.

This analysis process was not linear and to ensure reflexivity, phases were reviewed and reflected on at numerous points in the process.

3.9 Ensuring good quality Reflexive thematic analysis

Within the field of Reflective thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke (2022) outline a 15-point checklist to ensure good quality analysis is conducted (see table 9). This checklist outlines how to ensure the analysis process is rigorous, systematic, and reflexive. Within section 1.10 and 1.12, recommendations around how these strategies are utilised in this research to ensure high quality analysis was conducted are outlined.

Table 9: The 15-Point Checklist of Criteria for A Good Thematic Analysis Process (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p.269)

No.	Process	Criteria
1.	Transcription	The data has been transcribed to an appropriate level of detail; all transcripts have been checked against the original recordings for 'accuracy'.
2.	Coding	Each data item has been given thorough and repeated attention in the coding process.
3.		The coding process has been thorough, inclusive and comprehensive; themes have not been developed from a few vivid examples (an anecdotal approach).
4.		All relevant extracts for each theme have been collated.
5.		Candidate themes have been checked against coded data and back to the original data set.
6.		Themes are internally coherent, consistent, and distinctive; each theme contains a well-defined central organising concept; any subthemes share the central organising concept of the theme.
7.	Analysis and interpretation in the written report	Data has been analysed – interpreted and made sense of- rather than just summarised, paraphrased, or described.
8.		Analysis and data match each other – the extracts evidence the analytic claims.
9.		Analysis tells a convincing and well-organised story about the data and topic; analysis addresses the research question.
10.		An appropriate balance between analytic narrative and data extracts is provided.

11.	Overall	Enough time has been allocated to complete all phases of the analysis adequately, without rushing a phase or giving it a once-over-lightly (including returning to earlier phases or redoing the analysis if need be.)
12.	Written report	The specific approach to thematic analysis, and the particulars of the approach, including theoretical positions and assumptions, are clearly explicated.
13.		There is a good fit between what is claimed, and what is done – i.e., described method and reported analysis are consistent.
14.		The language and concepts used in the report are consistent with the ontological and epistemological position of the analysis.
15.		The researcher is positioned as <i>active</i> in the research process; themes do not just ‘emerge’.

3.10 Trustworthiness and dependability of the data for qualitative research

Golafshani, (2003) outlines that qualitative research positioned in this paradigm should not be judged using the same criteria as traditional qualitative methods based on measurable, objectivist assumptions. Therefore, judgements upon the nature of narrative based research require alternative measures (Reissman, 2008). Additionally, Reflexive thematic analysis involves the subjective interpretation of peoples experiences. Polkinghorne, (1995) suggests that reliability should be reframed as 'dependability' and validity as 'trustworthiness' in analysis, utilising Yardley's four principles for qualitative research (Yardley, 2008): sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance; alongside Braun and Clarke's (2022) 15-point checklist for good thematic analysis (Table 9).

Coherence:

Coherence relates to the need for links to be established to form chronological, coherent narrative accounts, similarities and differences across narratives (Reissman, 2008). Within this study, similarities and differences across themes was discussed and deviant codes that did not fit with themes produced explicitly acknowledged. Additionally, knowledge and exploration of the methods used, and alternative methods are presented, and Reflective Thematic analysis was best judged to meet the purpose of the research.

Persuasiveness:

Persuasiveness relates to the formation of theoretical links and claims that are supported by evidence derived from participant's accounts, and alternative explanations explored (Reissman, 2008). This was achieved by conducting a Systematic literature review of the

existing literature and theory in this area to ensure that the research questions were unique, and the questions used in the semi-structured interviews were appropriate and relevant to the research questions.

Transparency:

Transparency refers to ensuring that detailed information is available which represents the choices made by the researcher (Reissman, 2008). The researcher provided rationale around choice of methodology, alongside a detail presentation of the analysis process.

A reflexive approach has been presented throughout the write up to explore the influence of the researcher's personal characteristics, background and interests on data generation and analysis. To ensure that these reflections are explicit within the write up examples of the coded transcriptions, description of the development of codes and interpretations are presented (see appendix G), alongside extracts from the researcher's reflective diary (see appendix D).

Transferability:

This idea relates to the presentation of the research supporting the reader to think or feel differently about a phenomenon, providing useful outcomes related to theory and real-life implications (Yardley, 2008). Within this research, initially a Systematic Literature review was presented to outline what is already known in this field of research and to highlight the areas that required further exploration. Following this, the research question and methodology were constructed with the aim of building on existing literature in this area and offering insight into females perceived experiences. It is aimed that these findings may offer implications for practice following this research. However, it is acknowledged that this sample may not be representative of the experiences of all females that have been affiliated

with gangs but aims to provide insight into a sparsely researched area. Alongside offering conclusions that could influence practice and wider societal understanding, engagement, and intervention around gang affiliation. The researcher aimed to contextualise the experiences of the females interviewed as richly as possible to aid this process by describing demographics and the context of data collection.

Sensitivity:

To ensure that the research was conducted sensitively, background literature was explored, the socio-cultural context of participants considered. Within the data alternative interpretations were acknowledged (Yardley, 2008) alongside the influence of the researcher through reflexivity and reflection.

To ensure that the data transcribed was representative of the views of participants, the researcher shared the transcript of the interview with the participants if they wished and changes were made if relevant. In this study, all participants were contacted at the analysis stage and two out of the five participants wished to view the transcripts of their interviews and no subsequent changes were made.

To elevate the voices of participants and to create a coherent analysis direct quotes were used within the analysis.

Commitment and rigour:

This relates to ensuring that the analysis has been carried out with breadth and depth, showing justification of how participants were selected and recruited (Yardley, 2008). This was achieved through creating an inclusion and exclusion criteria that evolved following recruitment difficulties and feedback from community stakeholders. The recruitment process is outlined explicitly alongside decision points and rationale behind these decisions.

3.11 Reflexivity

Creswell and Miller, (2000) state the importance of disclosing researcher bias and assumptions. It is important to consider how these factors shaped the research to ensure that the research presented is transparent (Elliot, 2005).

It is important within this research to highlight the inseparable role of the researcher in the research process (Creswell and Miller, 2000). To address this, the researcher outlined their personal rationale for interest in this research to ensure that readers understand their personal positionality (Creswell and Miller, 2000); alongside their positionality in how data collection was approached and analysed.

Reflexivity refers to the research examining the influence of their own thoughts, feelings and reactions on the data collection and analytic process (Braun & Clarke, 2022). For example, questioning the impact the researcher's own views and knowledge around gang affiliation may have influenced the data collection process and the questions asked. To aid researcher reflexivity, reflexive journaling was undertaken to allow the researcher to reflect on their prior knowledge and assumptions at all stages of the research process, to encourage reflections on how this may have influenced data generation and analysis. The researcher aimed to be conscious of their own background through their reflective log and the influence that will have on participants' responses and openness to engage in discussions around their perceived experiences. Extracts of the researcher's reflective log are presented in Appendix D.

Additionally, the researcher formed a data analysis group with other Trainee Educational Psychologist researchers and discussions around the process of qualitative analysis were

discussed. The group were also utilised to ensure thematic labels were representative of the codes generated. University supervision with a tutor was also utilised to test out analytic ideas and to offer critique and new ideas throughout the research process. The supervision process was also utilised to aid reflexivity following interviews with participants. This was particularly beneficial because many of the interviewees disclosed traumatic events which could be emotionally impactful to the researcher. Therefore, seeking supervision to process the content of the interviews and the influence on the researcher was sought. This involved discussions with the researcher's placement supervisor following interviews, particularly in relation to her thoughts and feelings around the experiences the interviewees shared and the impact this had on her own opinions around gang affiliation and wider societal issues. Supervision was also used throughout the coding and analysis process to provide opportunities for reflexivity particularly in relation to the theme names used, evidence included in the report and discussions around the implications of the research.

Nvivo software was used to aid the analysis process and enabled the researcher to create an electronic paper trail related to the coding and theme generation processes of Reflective thematic analysis. This included: lists of codes, themes generated, theme labels and definitions and the final themes generated.

3.12 Ethical considerations

Guidance from the British Psychological Society's Code of Human Research Ethics (BSP, 2014) and from the University of Nottingham, were used to address the ethical challenges relevant to this study. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Nottingham Research Ethics committee (see appendix H).

3.12.1 Informed consent

All participants were informed of what their involvement would entail through discussions with the researcher and written information (Appendix I). Participants were asked to provide oral and written consent to the interview, alongside opportunities to ask questions throughout the process.

3.12.2 Confidentiality

Prospective participants' identities were not disclosed to the researcher, the 3rd party organisations contacted identified individuals who met the inclusion/ exclusion criteria. Only at the point of the prospective participants signalling that they wished to participate in the study was their identity communicated to the researcher, and initial contact made.

No personal information or details were recorded in the transcription and write up process.

Any comments that could be used to identify the individual were not used in the write up. Within the write up, participants are referred to by randomly generated pseudonyms.

Interviews occurred in a setting chosen by the participant which offered the necessary level of privacy and security from both the participant and researcher's perspective. Due to covid 19 restrictions, many of the interviews were conducted remotely on a secure password protected meeting interface such as Microsoft teams.

Subject to the consent of the participant, the interviews were audio recorded on a secure, password protected iPad, and were not uploaded to the cloud (feature on the iPad).

Appendix J outlines the information sheet.

3.12.3 Risk of harm to participants

It is acknowledged that interviewing females previously affiliated with gangs about their perceived experiences could potentially have raised sensitive issues. To minimise difficult feelings, all sessions were conducted in private spaces chosen by the participant, participants were also reminded that the data would be made un-identifiable such that pseudonyms were used and identifying features (e.g., name of area) removed. Participants were also reminded of their right to withdraw from not only the study but also answering individual questions. The researcher has received training in sensitive professional interactional skills.

Additionally, time was offered during the debrief giving the participant the opportunity to debrief after the interview to talk about anything they may have found difficult/stressful talking about in the interview. If appropriate, the participant received signposting to support services that may offer additional support if the participant was distressed or wished to discuss their experiences further. The researchers contact details were passed to all participants (not a personal number), so that they could approach the researcher after the interview if any difficult thoughts or questions.

The researcher also had the opportunity to debrief with her supervisor around any sensitive issues that were raised in the interviews, and where to seek additional support if required.

An exclusion criteria was used to ensure that individuals experiencing high levels of mental distress, significant SEND needs or turbulence at that time in their life were excluded from the study.

Efforts were made to ease participation in the interview using methods that accommodated the participants level of language and literacy, such as using a narrative story telling visual tool.

3.12.4 Right to withdraw

All participants were notified of their right to withdraw both orally and in a written form. Participants were provided with the researchers contact details and advised to make contact if they wished to withdraw from the study later.

Participants were reminded of their right to withdraw again during the debrief and were reminded that there would be no consequence in withdrawing and that all data related to their interview would be erased.

3.13 Summary

This chapter has provided rationale for the use of a Reflective Thematic analysis methodology to address the research questions using a Critical Realism ontology/Contextualist epistemology.

Five semi structured interviews were conducted with females between 24 and 29 years old using narrative tools, following recruitment using a snowball sampling methodology based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria created. An inductive, semantic analysis approach was adopted for data orientation and analysis.

The remaining chapters provide an overview of the research findings and the implications of the findings in relation to research and wider societal understanding and intervention.

4. Chapter 4: Analysis

4.1 Chapter overview

This chapter will initially present an overview of the themes generated from each research question outlined below.

Research questions: What are the perceptions of females formerly affiliated with gangs, of their experiences within gangs, in relation to:

1. joining gangs?
2. relationships in gangs?
3. desisting from the gang?

Each theme will be described and discussed in detail and interpretations made based on the evidence generated from the five interviews conducted. Recurrent themes that have relevance across the three research questions will also be discussed.

4.2 Overview of themes

Analysis of the interviews using reflexive thematic analysis led to the development of themes related to each research question.

Themes were generated following the procedure for conducting reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and involved six phases of analysis. This initially started with familiarisation of the data set, followed by initial coding of each interview. Initial codes were then categorised around each research question and themes were generated across interviews based on commonalities in the initial codes. These themes were then reviewed and defined. Further detail around this process can be found in section 3.81. Throughout this process the researcher used supervision support and peer support alongside a reflexive log to support the choices and decisions that were made as part of the reflexive thematic analysis process.

The themes generated are outlined in Figures 10 to 13, further detail around how the themes were generated following the reflexive thematic analysis process can be found in Appendix G, alongside a detailed commentary around each theme in section 4.3 to 4.6.

The themes presented are not discrete and connections exist between themes which will be explored in further detail. All the themes presented will be explored and relevant quotations from the interviews will be provided as illustrations for each theme.

Figure 10: Themes related to the participants' perceptions and experiences of joining gangs

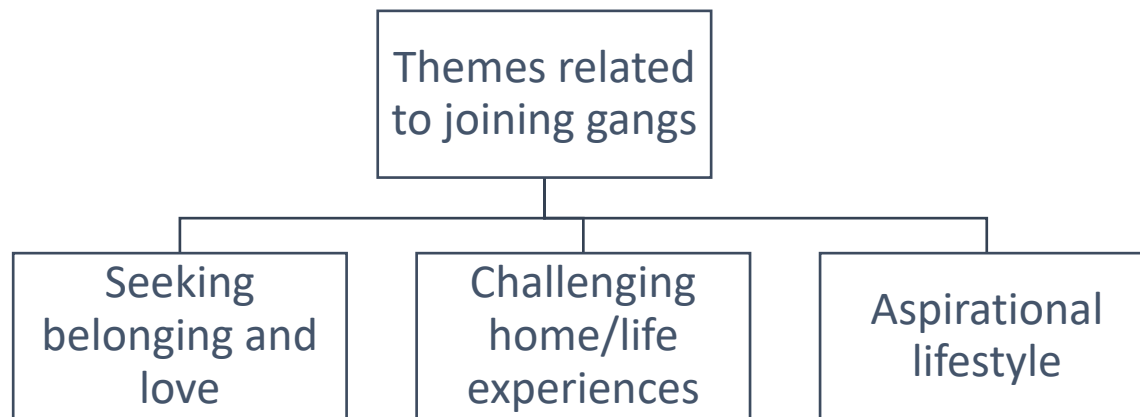


Figure 11: Themes related to the participants' perceptions and experiences of relationships in gangs

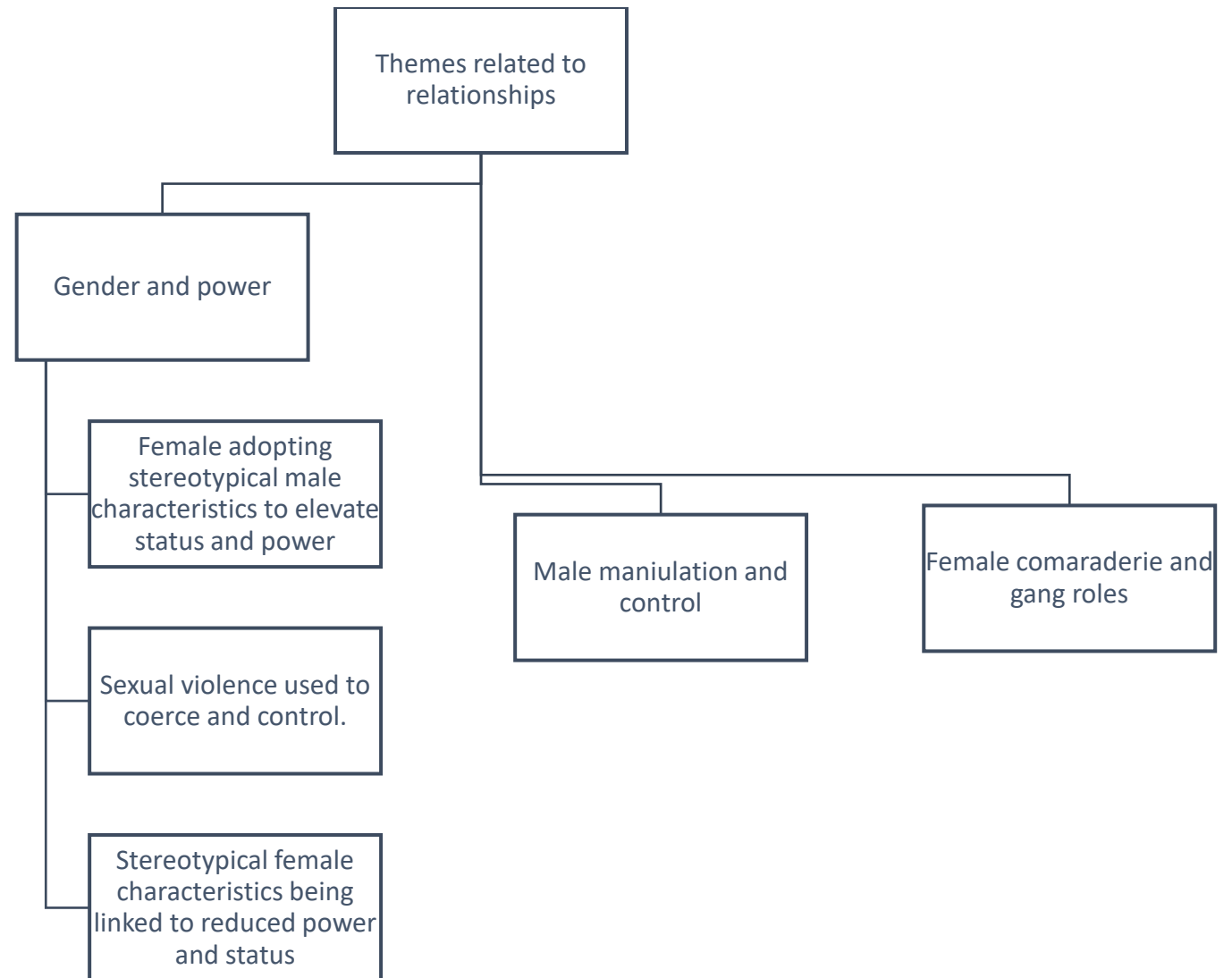


Figure 12: Themes related to the participants' perceptions and experiences of desisting from the gang

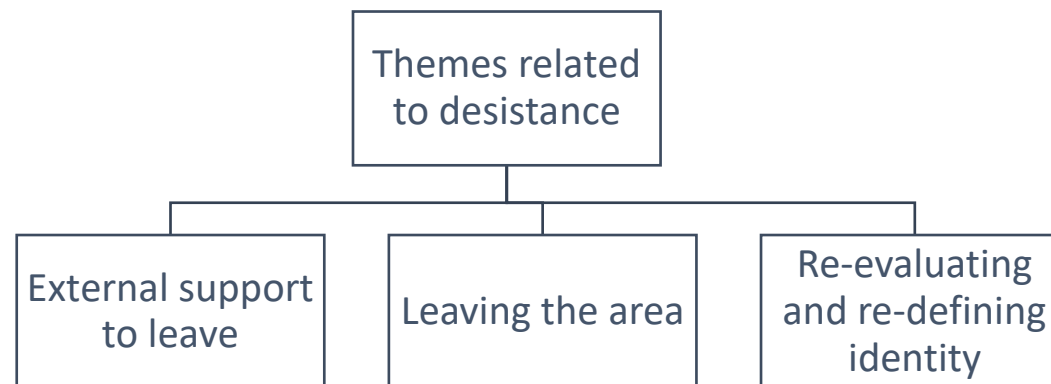
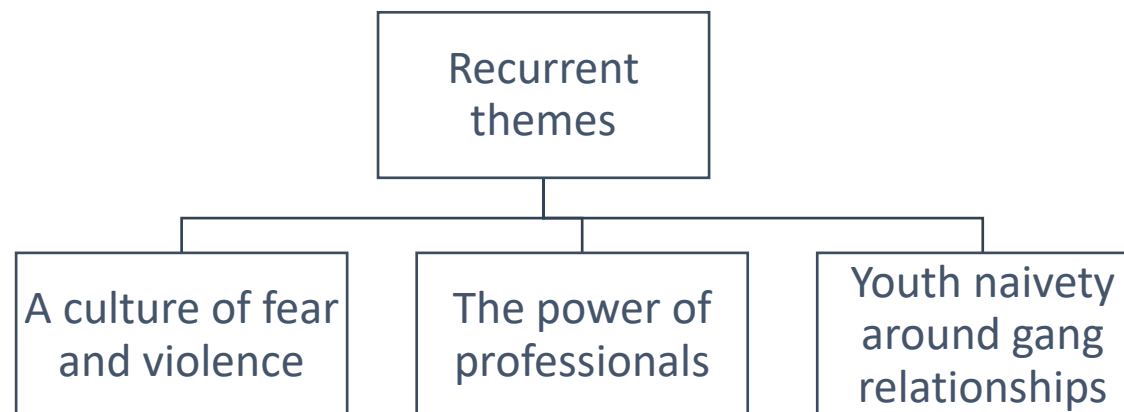


Figure 13: Recurrent themes connected to joining, relationships and desistance



4.3 Themes linking to perceptions and experiences of joining gangs

4.3.1 Theme 1: Challenging home/life experiences.

When forming their initial affiliation with the gang, many participants described challenging home or life circumstances acting as a catalyst pushing them closer to gang affiliation. For some women, the activities adopted by the gang were similar to those in their upbringing and were normalised, for example Maria and Faith described their home experiences as being linked with criminal activity. Some of the females reflected that their experiences of parenting or challenging circumstances at home such as poverty or domestic violence acted as a push factor increasingly the likelihood that they would become involved with the gang. Therefore, for some of the women interviewed gang affiliation was viewed similar to their childhood life experiences and/or as a method of escaping challenging experiences in the home.

In the experiences of some of the participants, criminal activity in the home may have encouraged them to become affiliated with the gang. Faith reflected that her family circumstances led her to gang affiliation due to criminal connections in the family, and Maria reflected that criminal activity was commonplace in her family home. She reflected that once affiliated with the gang, concealing, and disposing of goods for the gang was similar to experiences she had been exposed to in childhood.

Faith: "it was a very criminal household... Dad would be on the rob for this and that before he got nicked (sent to prison)"

Maria: "I remember clearly my Dad ringing up my primary school and demanding to speak to me... And him insisting that I come home now and hide the shot gun as the police were on their way ... I'd been hiding shit under my bed for my family and disposing of stuff all my life so it felt normal".

It is suggested that for some of the females interviewed their family experiences offer exposure to situations and norms that are similar to those within gang. Therefore, the activities of the gang may be normalised and viewed as an extension of experiences within

the home, which may have enhanced their sense of attraction and desire to belong to the group.

It was explored that home and life experiences may be challenging for some of the females due to their experiences of being parented. It was explored that these parental experiences may have influenced their likelihood of seeking affiliation with gangs, as a method of rebellion against parents or because their parents allowed them to be largely independent. Sophie reflected her parents “overprotective parenting” meant that she struggled to connect with peers at school, lacked social connection and became affiliated with the gang because she viewed socialising with the gang as a mechanism of rebellion.

Sophie: “Basically my mum is quite overprotective, quite controlling...Never allowed on residential (overnight school trips) Need to know where I was all the time.... I kind of rebelled.”

Contrastingly, Simran reflected that the lack of physical proximity and parental control exerted by her mother as she was “always working” gave her the opportunity to become affiliated with the gang.

Simran: “My mum was always working... we just looked after ourselves... I could do whatever I wanted, whenever, with whoever... she never knew what I was up to, I was free.”

Therefore, for some of the women their experiences of being parented may have influenced the likelihood of female becoming affiliated with anti-social groups such as gangs.

It was also suggested that gang affiliation may have filled a gap that was missing in their life at the time. For some of the women, gang affiliation offered a sense of acceptance and affection that was missing in their life or offered a sense of escapism from violence or adverse experiences at home. Joy reflected that her family circumstances were complicated due to her mother’s mental health leading to drug dealing activity being conducted in her home.

Joy: "my mum was very vulnerable... She started making friends with these guys... Three floors of people selling drugs from me house... (gang affiliation) offers a better life than the one at home, I suppose"

Faith reflected on domestic violence in the family home. It is suggested that for some women gang affiliation offers an escapism from their home life and that life and family experiences drive women and girls to seek psychological support and connection from external sources.

Faith: "my mum and my dad would argue all the time. My dad would beat up my mum. We would get beaten..."

This suggests that gang affiliation may have offered the women a sense of belonging and affection which is viewed as desirable; theme 2 explores the sense of belonging and affection acting as driving factor in females joining gangs in further detail. It seems that for the women interviewed challenging home and life experiences may have encouraged the females to seek emotional connections external from the home.

It was also suggested that gang affiliation may be viewed as desirable because it offered status in terms of social connection and belonging; this notion is explored more in theme 3 suggesting gang affiliation is aspirational. It is also suggested that some of the females were attracted to the gang because the gang lifestyle offered tangible rewards that may be viewed as aspiration. Faith reflected that once her Dad went to prison, she became involved in criminal activity to ensure the welfare of her family, because she felt she needed to steal to feed her family; therefore, gang affiliation was viewed as aspiration as members of the gang had access to goods and money, whereas she was stealing food from supermarkets to survive.

Faith: "I often went to bed in pain because I was hungry... I'd have to go to the supermarket and nick stuff just so we survived. We had nothin' in my house, we was proper on the breadline and they (gang members) had something"

It could be interpreted therefore that for some females, gang affiliation may have been viewed as a method of gaining financial support to care for their family and may be viewed

as a necessity if other support mechanisms are unavailable. Therefore, it is suggested that for women and girls living in poverty, affiliation with gangs may have offered the opportunity to gain goods and experiences that were previously perceived as unobtainable, alongside offering an opportunity to elevate their ability to obtain desirable money and goods.

In summary, the data set suggest that the females interviewed may have become affiliated with gangs because of challenging home and life experiences acting as a push factor to them joining the gang. It is suggested that gang affiliation offers emotional and social connection that may have been absent in their previous home or life experiences, due to a range of factors. It is suggested that for some women, gang affiliation offered tangible rewards such as money, that they needed to obtain to ensure the welfare of their family. For other participants, these tangible rewards were viewed as aspirational as they elevated their status and, in some cases, the activities the women engaged in were similar to the criminal activities undertaken by their family, so were normalised. Overall, this theme suggests that challenging home and life experiences encourage females to seek emotional connections external from the home, and often gang affiliation is viewed as desirable as it provides status in terms of tangible good and/or social connection. These ideas of belonging and aspiration are explored further in theme 2 and 3.

4.3.2 Theme 2: Seeking belonging and affection.

When joining the gang, many participants described gang affiliation as offering a sense of belonging and affection that may have been absent within their lives due to factors explored in theme 1.

For some participants, prior to joining the gang they felt isolated from their peers because of difficulties in forming friendships. Sophie reflected that due to these feelings of isolation, she was eager to form a friendship with anyone who would give her attention.

Sophie: "I felt really lonely and as soon as someone gave me an olive branch I went with it".

Maria also reflected that she was feeling isolated from her peers. She reflected that incidents in her childhood negatively impacted her sense of self and belonging, due to where she grew up as she was told that "people like you aren't welcome in our house".

Maria: "In primary school, I was at my friend's house... her mum asked where I live and I told her my estate and she said people like you aren't welcome in our house"

Maria: "I was kicked out of every school in X, was never there long enough to make friends as such"

It is viewed that some of the participants may have become affiliated with gangs due to a poor sense of belonging in other aspects of their life such as within their home or school environment and that this lack of belonging may lead to low psychological self-concept: self-identity and self-esteem. This suggests that a lack of connection to peers may have increased the women's vulnerability to exploitation and gang affiliation because they may have been more likely to form connections with anyone who showed them affection and this affection may disguise possible negative intentions. It is also understood that some of the women and girls may have been naïve to the realities of gang affiliation (as explored in theme 12) and were more vulnerable to manipulation and control by males within the gang (explored further in theme 5); experiences that may be more likely to occur if the woman desired to connect with anyone who provided her within attention.

It was also explored that many of the participants reflected that they lacked feelings of belonging in other areas of their life, for example at home or at school, and therefore this may have made them more likely to become affiliated with groups that offer these social and positive emotional experiences. For example, Sophie reflected that being affiliated with the gang, led to a sense of being known and being connected to others, which made her feel valued, which contrasted her feelings of loneliness and isolation prior to gang affiliation.

Sophie: "it felt great... Everyone loved me and wanted to get to know me. It finally felt like I'd made it...I kind of belonged"

Additionally, Joy and Simran suggested that gang affiliation offered a sense of affection that may be hard to resist and desist from as the group are viewed as an important group of people in their life who made them feel valued.

Joy: "they respect you and make you feel cherished and important... it's everything in one. This was our family."

Simran: "They are your family; they look out for you so you look out for them"

Therefore, being affiliated with a gang fostered a sense of reciprocal companionship, and a sense of unity that could be likened to that experienced in a family or peer group.

Some of the females interviewed stated that the sense of belonging within the gang often leads to females being drawn into 'active' gang affiliation. Joy and Faith suggested that feelings of belonging and affection in the initial interactions with members of the gang, led to them becoming involved in other areas of gang life such as holding goods.

Joy: "they show that they like you and then you like them. They ask you, can my friend come?... Can you hold this for me please?"

Faith: "'I was looking for genuinely loving relationships and was desperate for love and care... girls will do a lot of bad stuff for them just because they are in love with them"

It is suggested that members of the gang encouraged the females to feel they are valued by the group, because this motivates females to comply with their requests to gain approval from their partner or friends. Simran stated that a fear of being isolated from the group drove her desire to fulfil the requests of the gang members.

Simran: "round our ends (area) there weren't a lot to do really ... the crew always laughing and joking... You just wanted to be part of that life... You know if you say no, then you're an outcast again"

This may suggest that the affection and social connection provided by the gang offered significant attraction to encourage the females to become affiliated. It is implied that this attraction may be stronger if the women lacked affection and connection elsewhere in their

life and may increase the significance of the gang in their life. It is suggested that in the initial stages of affiliation, fear of becoming outcast from the gang is experienced as the women didn't wish to return to their previous feelings of isolation. The notion of the gang manipulating women and girls with affection is explored further in theme 5 (male manipulation and control) and the culture of fear that is used to control females is explored further in theme 10.

In summary, the data set appears to indicate that for the women interviewed they joined the gang because gang affiliation was viewed as providing them with a sense of belonging and affection. Perhaps connected to the challenging home/life circumstances explored in theme 1, gang affiliation may have offered a sense of acceptance and affection that was otherwise missing. This sense of connection to the gang could also be described as a maintenance factor reinforcing females' involvement in gang activity to continue their affiliation and approval with peers.

4.3.3 Theme 3 Aspirational lifestyle

When joining the gang, many participants described gang affiliation as being perceived as being aspirational and offering tangible goods and experiences that may differ from those previously experienced due to challenging home/life experiences, as explored further in theme 1 (challenging home/life experiences).

For some participants, they reflected that being affiliated with the gang offered an aspirational lifestyle in terms of wealth, material goods and exciting experiences. Maria reflected that she wanted to be part of the gang because she wished to be part of the social scene the gang offered, such as attending parties, and to have material goods. She reflected that for her the gang offered a dream like reality, where she was able to have nice clothes and thrilling experiences, that were not commonly available in her childhood.

Maria: "you wanted to be part of that and to have a slice of all the stuff they had, like the trainers, the party invites".

Maria: "we got given nice clothes, drove around in fast cars. It was every kids dream."

Faith reflected that gang affiliation was aspirational as members of the gang were able to own expensive material goods.

Faith: "would be flashing their fancy watches and that. We had nothin' in my house, we was proper on the breadline and they had something."

It is suggested that for the women living in poverty, gang affiliation may have been viewed as more desirable because gang members were openly exhibiting a lifestyle that was very different to their own and offer tangible rewards that they may be unlikely to obtain without gang affiliation. It is suggested that these goods elevate the gang members' status in the community, likening gang members to role models and displaying that joining the gang offered access to luxurious goods and exciting experiences.

For some participants, joining a gang was viewed as aspirational because gang members had elevated status in the community. Joy reflected that gang affiliation was aspirational and attractive because it was viewed as a method of obtaining status and power amongst her peers. She suggested that by gaining the tangible, material rewards of being affiliated with the gang, she was able to elevate her own status and look important in front of her peers. It is suggested that the gang were a visible presence in the community and that gang activity was a well-known that method of gaining money.

Joy: "they're going to people who, in their eyes, are attractive.... All the status, the power, the respect these people have on the street and also the fear that they command".

Joy: "there's a lot of money around... You get money and you get to look big in front of your mates, which is hard to resist ...I'm not gonna really ask me family for

money... I'm gonna try and get it myself. If you've got the connections and they were literally at my doorstep, your gonna do that".

Maria reflected that members of the gang offered her the trainers she wanted if she carried goods for them.

Maria: "I really wanted these trainers and I remember one of the older guys ... saying if I dropped off a package for him, he'd get me the trainers. I would have done anything for them".

Therefore, it is suggested that the gang members may have exploited the needs and desires of young people to encourage them to become involved in gang related activity. This is important because some of the individuals may have aspired to have money and the luxurious lifestyle which is publicly displayed by the gang. Therefore, making gang affiliation desirable because it offers the opportunity for the women and girls to obtain this lifestyle. For some women, joining the gang may have been viewed as the only option of gaining money and status in their community. It is proposed that gang members may be aware of these desires and offer financial benefits for females joining the gang, knowing that they are unlikely to be able to obtain these goods elsewhere.

In summary, the data set appears to indicate that gang affiliation may have been viewed as aspirational because it provided the participants with tangible rewards such as money, goods, status, and power. Perhaps connected to the challenging life circumstances explored in theme one, gang affiliation was perceived as offering a lifestyle that may have been unobtainable for women and girls through any other means. This sense of tangible rewards may have deepened their connection to the gang and may have helped maintain the females' involvement in gang activity to obtain this aspirational lifestyle.

In relation to research question, one looking at exploring perceptions and experiences of females when joining the gang, it is suggested that challenging family and life factors in the women's lives act as a catalyst making gang affiliation more likely. It is suggested that experiences within their lives may lead women to actively seek belonging and affection, and

therefore gang affiliation is viewed as aspirational for the participants as it offered emotional and social connection which may have been absent in other areas of their lives. Gang affiliation was also perceived by some participants as aspirational because it offered rewards in terms of financial support and an elevation in status for some women.

4.4 Themes linking to perceptions and experiences of relationships in gangs

4.4.1 Theme 4: Gender and power.

The females interviewed reflected that gender roles and perceived power were reflected in the relationships between members of the gangs.

Three subordinate themes were generated from this superordinate theme:

- Stereotypical female characteristics being linked to reduced power and status
- Sexual violence used to coerce and control.
- Female adopting stereotypical male characteristics to elevate status and power

4.4.1.1 Stereotypical female characteristics being linked to reduced power and status

When reflecting on the relationships experienced when part of the gang, for some of the participants they reflected that individuals with stereotypically female characteristics were less respected and had less power in the group than males. When this was explored, the women interviewed reflected that often women and girls' roles in the gang were linked with reduced power and status in the gang.

For some participants, they reflected that women with stereotypically female characteristics in the gang were only allowed to do certain roles such as: holding/ carrying goods, being in long term relationships with gang members and having their children, or being viewed as a sexual object. It was suggested that the females with these characteristics i.e., being

attractive, not being physically violent or confrontational, would be viewed as lower status to males and females with male characteristics.

Sophie: "men have all the power and can do what they want... You say no to what he wants and you're gone mate... women are kept kinda in their boxes, you either do a job, be treated like meat or look after the babies, that's kinda it They saw women as baby machines or sex objects, that they are people that could like hide stuff... He would also ask me to hold stuff for him. So I hid things under my bed... weapons, drugs, money"

Maria: "I think the guys just saw me and the girls as goods that could either be used for sex or used to smuggle stuff to parties, carrying stuff around."

It is suggested that due to this lack of status, many of the women were coerced into compliance due to fear of being outcast or being hurt, as within the gang there is culture of fear and violence (as explored in theme 10). It is also suggested that attractive females were utilised by the gang to attract other males who are then robbed by the gang, or females are used as a decoy to distract from a crime if a female is perceived to be "really pretty ... or nice".

Simran: "most of the time, girls were used for sex. But the really pretty girls or the nice girls were used as decoys when a gang went out on the rob or be used as a honey trap very often to lure in guys to rob"

This suggests that female characteristics were viewed by the gang as having a specific purpose and these roles were linked with a lack of status and power within the group, which means that the power balance and relationships between males and females in the group are unequal. This lack of status was perceived by many of the participants as leaving the females vulnerable to exploitation and unable to advocate for their own desires.

Many of the participants reflected that females are viewed as fulfilling subordinate roles within gangs such as carrying drugs and weapons because often females are less likely to be stopped by the police.

Simran: "girls do things that guys can't do... carry the drugs, do pick ups and that. The cops don't tend to stop girls, especially if they look nice."

Therefore, it is suggested that gangs recruit females for these roles, as it is preferable for females to carry goods for the gang because they are less likely to be stopped, searched or prosecuted by police; actions that could hinder gang activity. Maria reflected that white females who are young and speak "nice" are less likely to be stopped by the police.

Maria: "You'd have to plug drugs (insert drugs into internal cavities) and off you'd go with a duffle bag full of gear on the train. It's always been the same, young, white girls, who speak nice won't be stopped by the police"

Perhaps suggesting that the police may have a preconceived opinion of who is likely to be in a gang and what these individual's look and sound like. This may imply that females are less likely to be viewed as gang members by professionals.

Joy: "Feds don't stop girls, especially if you look all prim and proper... guys will say put this in your bag or bra whatever and you do it"

Therefore, the females suggested that women and girls may be more likely to be exploited by gangs because they are less likely to be stopped by the police and have a role in the gang that can only be fulfilled by women and girls.

Many of the participants described the lack of power and status experienced by females as leaving women and girls vulnerable to coercion and exploitation by the gang. They reflected that often they were forced to comply with the requests of males in the gang because if they didn't, they would be hurt or outcast.

Maria: "There was this expectation that you would do whatever the guys said. Guys were top of the hierarchy and we knew that and we knew better than to say no or argue"

Joy: "If you say no to them, then they will just lock you up in the house and keep doing it anyway. You know if you step a foot wrong, you will lose your respect and bad things will happen to you"

The culture of fear and violence is used to control and coerce women and girls as further explored in theme 10.

In summary, the data suggests that stereotypically feminine women and girls are given certain roles within the gang such as carrying and transporting goods, providing sexual services or form long term relationships. It is suggested that many of the participants were viewed as having lower status and power than males and therefore were forced to adopt these roles due to coercion and control exerted by males in the group. It is also suggested by the participants that females are forced to adopt certain roles if they possess stereotypically female characteristics due to systemic issues meaning females are less likely to be stopped by the police and may be able to attract males or act as decoys in criminal operations.

4.4.1.2 Sexual violence used to coerce and control.

Many of the females reflected that sexual violence was used by the males in the gang to coerce and ensure compliance with male requests, and it was perceived that often sexual assault was normalised within the gang.

The participants suggested that sexual violence was used by males in the gang to control females and due to the women and girls lack of status in the gang they were unable to stop this from occurring.

Sophie: "I had no voice and no control over my own body. If someone wanted a blow job or sex or whatever, C would offer me up like meat and I had to do it, I knew I had to do it as if I didn't he would hurt my family ... months were like this, daily abuse, 3, 4 guys a day maybe ...other girls were just like objects, shag and move on"

Sexual violence was described as a tool used to threaten females into compliance and that women were made to witness sexual assault with the threat that this would happen to them or their family if they didn't follow the requests of the males in the gang.

Maria: "she was raped continually and we were told to shut up and watch or else it would be done to us"

It was implied that sexual violence is normalised and sexual objectification of women and girls was common place in the gangs the participants were affiliated with.

Sexual violence was described by the participants as a threat used to ensure that females complied. Some of the participants suggested that they participated in sexual acts to protect their friends, whereas other participants suggested that they recruited other females to meet the sexual needs of the males in the gang.

Maria: "I put up with so much to protect them... like I know if I say no to that guy, he would rape my friend, it was easier just to sleep with him."

Simran reflected that within the gang, she was made to recruit females to the gang who would then be sexually assaulted.

Simran: "I still have nightmares about the victims I created... But I thought I was protecting myself ... there are only so many times that you can hear a line up, when man after man does what he wants with a girl in a room, it triggers something in you that is nothing other than fear ... I had to watch them rape girls... they made me watch and made it clear that I had caused this and if I didn't carry on finding girls then the same would happen to me or my family ... do you know how many times they said they would rape my mum? Guys see girls as sort of like an initiation to the gang... you will do anything for that not to be you, even if that means throwing people you call friends under the bus ...when my man says that he has chosen that one, you have to go and tell that girl what the time is or they will rape you".

Sexual activity was suggested to be a powerful tool within the gang and was used to control and threaten females. The participants reported that sexual activity had a large presence in gangs and often sexual acts were used as a method of male initiation into the group. The

women appeared to indicate that females in the group were perceived by males as objects having no control or power over their treatment. They also suggested that some women and girls were willing to do anything possible to avoid sexual violence towards themselves or their family and friends, such as complying with requests or recruiting females for sexual roles.

In summary, the data set appears to suggest that sexual violence is commonplace and normalised within the gangs discussed. The participants described sexual violence being commonly used as a threat and a method of coercing and controlling women and girls to comply with the demands of the gang. They suggested that due to their lack of power and status in the gang, females were often unable to prevent sexual violence from occurring, leading to them being assaulted themselves or manipulating other females to satisfy male sexual desires.

4.4.1.3 Female adopting stereotypical male characteristics to elevate status and power

When exploring their relationships within gangs, it was reflected that to elevate the status and power of females within the gang, some of the participants adopted stereotypical male characteristics, such as showing physical violence. They suggested that these characteristics were linked with higher status roles in the gang and were viewed as a way of protecting females against sexual violence.

Some of the females interviewed suggested that masculine characteristics were associated with high status role in the gang such as fighting and selling drugs. They reflected that if women could prove that they had these characteristics then they gained more respect in the group than females who couldn't fight or sell drugs.

Maria: "You're not going to get respect from them unless you become like them... to gain acceptance, girls must adopt a more masculine persona ... A girl could progress by being quite ruthless, like being a bad girl, fighting, selling and that. If you show

that you can do what the guys can you get status and respect...If you want to get anywhere in that game, you've got to be ruthless and know the score"

They suggested that often females who are physically violent were used to threaten females in the gang or were used to settle disputes with females in other gangs.

Simran: "stab'em, burn them, whatever needs to be done to get the message across basically... you have to be feared or else"

Sophie: "they (the females) were more threatening than the guys, they would tell us that we had to do stuff or else they would hurt us or our family."

Maria: "if someone snitched, they'd call me and I would beat them up... like if someone was disrespected in your group, you had to make a stand. Like I've stabbed a girl in the neck... You will do anything to stay respected and liked by your crew"

They implied that females needed to be ruthless and feared to gain status and power within the gang.

The participants suggested that women and girls often adopted a stereotypical masculine persona because this was a method of avoiding sexual violence. Many of the females explored the implications of sexual activity and exploitation of females in gangs, with females disclosing that females who adopt this sexual role being viewed negatively by the gang.

Faith: "if you can fight, you're on road, if you can't you're just another hole mate"

Maria: "if you don't make them pay, then you're a link, only good for sex."

This suggests that females in a sexual role possessed the lowest status, were seen as possessions and referred to in derogatory terms by their fellow male and female members. They implied that females who adopted traditional masculine characteristics were viewed as valued members of the gang, whereas females who didn't adopt these characteristics were sexualised and were at risk of sexual

exploitation. This is also suggesting that some of females were viewed by males in the gang as objects 'used' for sexual activity unless they could prove their 'worth' in other fields.

Many of the females interviewed suggested that women and girls act differently around the gang to ensure they are viewed as having a masculine persona.

Maria: "I wasn't a woman on road... I was more manly on road, and with the way you speak as well, you sound like a man, you act like a man. I couldn't be the girly-girl on road, because everyone would be like 'You don't deserve to be on road'... you don't want them to see that side of you because that would make you weak and people would question your position and that".

Therefore, suggesting that some of the females made a conscious choice to act and behave in this way, to protect themselves from sexual violence and to elevate their status in the group.

In summary, the data set suggests that some of the participants viewed adopting masculine characteristics as a method of elevating a female's status in the gang and as a method of avoiding sexual violence.

Overall, the theme of gender and power suggests for the participant's female power and status was strongly associated with gender and perceived female or male characteristics. They suggested that females adopting stereotypical female characteristics were often viewed as having low power and status in the gang and were often exposed to sexual violence by males in the gang. It is suggested that some of the females adopted stereotypically masculine characteristics in the gang, and these characteristics were often linked with violence. They suggested that this was done to enhance their status, respect, and power within the group.

4.4.2 Theme 5: Male manipulation and control

When exploring their relationships within the gang, many participants described feeling controlled by male members of the gang. For some participants they felt that this lack of power and control was experienced within their peer relationships in the gang, whereas other participants reflected that this was experienced within intimate relationships with male gang members.

Some of the women described that within intimate relationships, women and girls were often exposed to domestic violence. Some of the participants reflected that often females experienced abusive treatment within their relationships which is normalised within the gang and in some cases was normalised by early childhood experiences (explored further in theme 1 around challenging home/life experiences). It was reflected that often at the start of gang affiliation, some of the females experienced a positive experience with their partners, one of affection and care (linked to theme 2 around belonging and affection). However, after some time affiliated with the gang, they experienced a change in male attitudes towards control, abuse and a lack of power.

Sophie: "He said that I was beautiful...He protected me and he made me feel safe, and that was just what I needed at the moment. Your hearing all of these things you want to hear, you get so lost in that world that you are not realising what is actually happening and what you are getting yourself intoHe was quite controlling, he wanted to know where I was all the time ...He'd be telling me that I'm fat, ugly and crazy and worthless ...He kind of controlled how everyone else behaved around me"

The women suggested that at the start of affiliation, women and girls were often treated favourably to encourage them to participate in gang activities and feel a sense of belonging and connection to the gang. However, over time their relationships within the members of the gang may change to become more hostile and controlling, and due to the females lack of power and status within the group this behaviour is normalised and accepted due to the females' desire to remain connected to the group or due to fear of sexual violence (theme 4: gender and power and 10: culture of fear and violence). The women explored that within

gangs, males manipulate and control female treatment at different stages of their affiliation to ensure that they remain compliant and fulfil the desires of the gang.

For some of the participants, they reflected feeling controlled and manipulated by the male gang members because they had shown them affection and offered a sense of belonging that the women and girls desired (linking to theme 2: belonging and affection).

It is suggested that some of the women and girls were manipulated by males in this way to ensure that they were willing to do anything to support that group and stay affiliated.

Simran: "you have to do what you got to do for the gang ...they were my friends and I would do anything for them... Once you're in, you basically ride or die for the gang... you're in the gang now, so whatever happens you got to deal with the consequences... girls show their loyalty by doing anything that is asked of them"

The participants suggested that often this desire to belong and gain social and emotional connections occurs prior to gang affiliation and they were manipulated by the male members of the gang by presenting the gang as a family to whom the females are indebted to and maintaining their affiliation through fear.

Maria: "You don't get to leave the gang. You either leave in a body bag or a police car, you don't get to step away. I think they wanted to show me that they had the power and they controlled me."

In summary, the data set suggests that some of the females within the gang were controlled and manipulated by males in their recruitment and in their affiliation with the gang. They suggested that male members of the gang altered their treatment throughout their relationship with females to attract females and then ensure they remained compliant, through initially providing a sense of affection and belonging, and then using threats and violence. This sense of connection to the gang and feelings of emotional and social connection were perceived as being used to control and manipulate women and girls at all stages of their affiliation and to make desistance challenging.

4.4.3 Theme 6: Female camaraderie and gang roles

When exploring relationships within the gang, for some of the females they reflected that they felt a sense of camaraderie within the gang with females who had similar group roles to them or had similar characteristics.

For some participants, they formed friendships with other females in the gang who had similar roles to them within the group.

Simran: "a few of us were tight. We all did the same kinda recruiting thing I suppose, we were always together".

Joy: "we were like a mini-gang in ourselves the 3 of us, hard arses we were, tough as shit"

This suggests that for individuals with similar characteristics they developed a sense of camaraderie due to these similarities and may have then adopted similar roles, meaning that they were working in close proximity to each other.

For some participants, they described a similarity in feelings with other females in the gang e.g. feeling out of their depth, and that this led to a sense of connection and need to support and protect one another.

Maria: "we were tight, we had each other's backs. We were similar, you know, I think we all realised that we were so out of depth and didn't know how to get out.... I put up with so much to protect them."

This may suggest that within some gangs, the females with similar characteristics and feelings may have formed close relationships and adopted behaviours to protect their friends from harm.

In summary, the data set suggests that a form of camaraderie and friendship formed amongst some of the females who adopted similar roles or characteristics within the gang. It was explored by some of the participants, that this may have occurred due to them being in close proximity to each other and/ or having similar roles or traits. For some females, this friendship network with other women and girls offered a feeling a sense of support and protection for one another.

In relation to research question two looking at exploring perceptions and experiences of female's relationships within gang, it is suggested that their relationships with males in the group were mediated by their perceived characteristics (in terms of stereotypical gender expectations) and subsequent status and power. Many of the participants reflected that females were often viewed as lower status than males, and were subjected to sexual violence and manipulation by males in the gang. The participants reflected that adopting a stereotypical masculine persona was viewed as a protective factor against sexual violence and that women with this persona were granted more status and power than other females in the gang. Many of the females reflected that they experienced manipulation and controlling relationships with males within the gang, and often their treatment by males changed over the course of their affiliation. They suggested that at the start of their affiliation, they were often cared for and given lavish gifts and exposed to exciting experiences, potentially as a method of gaining their affection and loyalty. However, the participants reflected that once affiliated they were exposed to violence and control within the gang, which was normalised and common place. Some the participants reflected that they formed friendships with females who adopted similar roles within the gang or had similar characteristics to themselves.

4.5 Themes linked to perceptions and experiences of desisting from the gang

4.5.1 Theme 7: Re-evaluating and redefining identity

In coming to a decision to end their association with a gang, many participants described a single and defining point that led them to re-evaluate and re-define their identity and their

aspirations towards gang membership. For some participants, this point of re-evaluation was reached after continued experiences of abuse or violence, whereas for others, their point of re-evaluation was in response to a specific, perhaps traumatic, event.

Some of the participants reflected that they decided to leave the gang following prolonged experiences of abuse or violence, and an event providing them with the opportunity to leave. Sophie reflected after sexual abuse, she wished to leave but was only able to do so when provided with an opportunity that felt like “it was now or never”. She reflected that this event led to her being able to redefine her identity away from the gang.

Sophie: “so everyday I was locked in that house... daily abuse... I couldn’t go on like this, I just wanted to die...He (boyfriend) was off his face on something ... it was now or never...I just remember grabbing the keys and running, and never looking back”

Similarly, Joy reflected that she left the gang as violence within the gang made her re-evaluate her identity and encouraged her to leave. She suggested that she was only able to leave the gang if she was involved in one last criminal ‘job’ which resulted in her going to prison. It is suggested that for some of the women they wished to leave the gang but were only able to do so when their circumstances changed, such as being provided with a way of escaping the gang. It is indicated that for some of the participants the prison system offered them the opportunity to redefine their identity through education and support.

Joy: “I saw the bad and the ugly ... lads being stabbed in the face or cut from ear to ear, and knew if I didn’t leave when I did that would happen to me... the only way out was one last job... went tits up...I went to prison... I did what they wanted, didn’t grass on no one so that was square... prison helped me get my exams and that, and start a new life when I got out.”

It is suggested that for some of the women, this support to redefine their identity provided the foundations for a life outside the prison away from gang affiliation.

Some of the participants reflected that traumatising life events, such as overdosing or peers going to prison, led them to re-evaluate their lives and decided to leave the gang.

Faith: "I did a lot of crack (cocaine)...I took an overdose... They told me that I wouldn't be able to have kids because of the damage... it was the last time I ever harmed myself, that's when things got serious ... I needed to change"

Simran: "every single person went to prison, for at least a year or two years... And then I'm like the only person that hasn't... so I felt like I needed to stop."

In other cases, life events such as finding out your pregnant led to some of the women wishing to leave the gang.

Maria: "when I was pregnant... I said I didn't want to live like this anymore."

Therefore, it is suggested that when events caused the women and girls to reflect on their current experiences due to their lives being changed in some way, this acted as a 'wake-up call' which encouraged them to desist from gang affiliation and create a new identity away from the gang.

In summary, the data set appears to indicate that females affiliated with gangs often experienced a significant event that may have led them to re-evaluate their affiliation with the gang and encouraged them to desist and redefine their identity. It is suggested that these events may differ amongst the females interviewed, but often were emotive events that occurred to the individual or those close to them that cause a significant change in their lives.

4.5.2 Theme 8: Leaving the area

Many of the participants reflected on wanting to leave the gang and that leaving the area was instrumental in supporting their desistance from the gang. For some participants this involved geographically moving to a different location through their own choice, or due to being housed in a children's care home or entering the prison system.

For some participants, they left the area the gang operated in due to fear and felt that the only way of being 'free' of the gang was to have a fresh start. It is suggested that for some of the women fear for their own safety and their families wellbeing once they leave means they need to leave the area.

Sophie: "I got straight in the car and went home... my family were terrified of what the gang would do.... That day we packed up our main stuff and moved to live at my Aunties. I never looked back.... We were all so scared of the retaliation of the gang that it was the only safe thing to do. They (Mum and Dad) just wanted to get away and leave everything behind we had to physically move areas, we were so worried about retaliation for me leaving and needed a fresh start.... I was so lucky that my family were in a positive to do that to protect me... I don't think I'd be here if they hadn't done that."

Maria: "I told them I needed to leave for my son.... they (members of the gang) jumped (attacked) me when I was leaving the hospital with my son... hurt me so bad that I had to stay in hospital for longer... the social (services) got involved and put me up in a secure setting for mums and babies in another part of X, and found me somewhere safe to stay long term away from X... I needed to be cut off from my old life... then she (youth worker) found me somewhere to live in the country, away from it all... Just me and my little boy against the world, living in the middle of nowhere."

It is implied that creating physical distance between the participants and the gang, was often viewed as the only way they were able to have a fresh start and are able to ensure their safety. This therefore suggests that the fear of retaliation by the gang if they left was so significant that many of the participants had to relocate away from their current support systems for their own safety. This implied that the culture of fear and violence within gangs plays a large role in the participants feeling unable to leave gang affiliation, as further explored in theme 10.

In other cases, the women were forced to leave the area due to external systems which subsequently meant that they left the gang. The external systems may be via the Criminal Justice System or through Social Care.

Faith: "That is where TN (care home) comes into it... I was angry at the world... I just wanted to be loved... I needed a family ... I got allocated my key worker... she kinda became my Mum"

Joy: "prison helped me get my exams and that, and start a new life when I got out."

Faith suggested that when females are in a different geographical area to the gang it involved as high amount effort for the women or girls to stay affiliated with the gang, and this therefore provided a chance for them to create a new identity as explored in theme 7.

In summary, the data set indicates that physically leaving the area was instrumental in supporting the participants' desistance from the gang. For some participants this involved geographically moving to a different location due to their own choice, or due to other factors such as incarceration. They reflected that leaving the area was viewed as a positive factor and a method of forming a new identity away from the gang and ensuring their safety due to fears of retaliation for leaving the gang.

4.5.3 Theme 9: External agency support to leave

In coming to a decision to end their association with a gang, many participants described being supported by external agencies such as social workers or youth workers, and that these individuals had a significant impact on them remaining away from gang activity long term.

For some women and girls, they suggested that support from an external agency offered experiences of affection and belonging, which aided their desistance because this provided an alternative way of gaining social connection away from the gang.

Faith: "That is where TN (care home) comes into it... I was angry at the world... I just wanted to be loved... I needed a family ... I got allocated my key worker... she kinda became my Mum"

Sophie: "I go to a support group that's just for women, which is so much better."

They also implied that often females may look to the gang to provide social and emotional support that may be absent elsewhere, as described in theme 1 (challenging home/life experiences) and therefore the support offered from a key worker may have provided this support in a pro social domain. They suggested that often females are looking for affection and support, which is initially offered by the gang but that pro-social groups that can offer similar feelings of affection and support can be important in aiding desistance.

Many of the females interviewed reflected that being provided with holistic support that includes accommodation away from the gang, financial support, and access to education, provided them with the tools to form a new identity away from the gang.

Maria: "I was put in contact with the most amazing youth worker. She helped me, found me somewhere safe to go, accommodation, money, education, everything, so I didn't have to go back to the gang."

Joy: "prison helped me get my exams and that, and start a new life when I got out."

They implied that having these tools to start a new life was important in ensuring that they are able to form a new identity, linking to theme 7 (re-evaluating and redefining identity). The participants suggested that to desist from gang affiliation, they needed support in numerous areas of their life to supplement the financial support and emotional connections being associated with the gang may provide, and that if this isn't provided then they may be more likely to reconnect with the gang.

In summary, the data set suggested that to aid desistance from gang affiliation many of the females interviewed required holistic pro-social support to supplement the support offered by the gang. This included financial support, emotional support, housing support, educational support, and access to bespoke support groups for females. They suggested that in adolescence for some females this support may have been provided through a

nurturing home environment or social care support. As females mature and enter adulthood this support may have been offered by other support services such as youth workers and charity groups.

In relation to research question three looking at exploring perceptions and experiences of females when desisting from gang affiliation, it is suggested that many of the females wished to leave the gang following a life changing event that led them to re-evaluate their gang affiliation and desire to form a new identity away from the gang. Many of the participants reflected that leaving the gang was only possible if they left the geographical area of the gang, because of fears around their safety if the gang retaliated. They also suggested that a high level of holistic support was required to support them in their desistance and to ensure they were able to form a new identity separate from the gang.

4.6 Recurrent themes linking to joining, relationships and desistance

4.6.1 Theme 10: A culture of fear and violence

Many of the females reflected that violence and fear were integral parts of their gang experiences. It was suggested that violence towards women and girls was normalised, and that violence was commonly used by the males in the gang to coerce and ensure compliance through gang affiliation, their relationships within the group and when females expressed a desire to leave the gang.

Many of the females interviewed reflected that within the gang there was fear around sexual violence that would occur if females were viewed as sexual objects or if they didn't comply with the requests of other gang members.

Maria: "she was raped continually and we were told to shut up and watch or else it would be done to us... like I know if I say no to that guy, he would rape my friend"

Simran: "there are only so many times that you can hear a line up, when man after man does what he wants with a girl in a room, it triggers something in you that is nothing other than fear".

It is suggested that within gangs, many of the women and girls experienced an implicit fear of losing respect and being exposed to violence if they didn't comply with the gang's requests. They implied that this fear was reinforced by women being forced to witness sexual violence towards other females in the gang and hearing explicit threats that the same would occur to them or their families if they didn't comply. Therefore, suggesting that fear and violence was commonly used to control their actions and ensure compliance within the gang they were affiliated with as explored in theme 4 (gender and power) and theme 5 (male manipulation and control).

In relation to leaving the gang, some of the participants reflected that they feared retaliation from the gang if they left. Maria reflected that she felt that individuals only left the gang if they were arrested or if they were killed. She also described her own experiences of violence towards her and her new-born son when she tried to leave.

Maria: "You don't get to leave the gang. You either leave in a body bag or a police car, you don't get to step away. I think they wanted to show me that they had the power and they controlled me."

Maria: "I told them I needed to leave for my son.... they (members of the gang) jumped me when I was leaving the hospital with my son... hurt me so bad that I had to stay in hospital for longer".

Sophie reflected that both her and her family were concerned about the consequences of her leaving the gang and this led them to leave the area.

Sophie: "I knew I had to do it as if I didn't he would hurt my family ... they would tell us that we had to do stuff or else they would hurt us or our family.... we (Sophie and her family) were so worried about retaliation for me leaving and needed a fresh start ... I don't think I'd be here if they hadn't done that."

The participants suggested that fear of retaliation if females leave was used to control women and girls into compliance.

Simran: “they made me watch and made it clear that I had caused this and if I didn’t carry on finding girls then the same would happen to me or my family ... do you know how many times they said they would rape my mum?”

This fear of violence was used to manipulate and force the women to stay affiliated with the gang, because they feared that their family or themselves would be subjected to more harmful experiences if they left.

In summary, the data set suggest that fear was commonly used within gangs described to ensure that females complied with the actions requested by the gang, and that fear of retribution may have made leaving the gang challenging for many of the participants. They suggested that fear and violence was part of the culture of gangs and that this threatening behaviour towards women and girls was normalised and common place. They reflected that the sense of fear led to fractured relationships within the gang, females experiencing traumatising events and women feeling unable to leave the gang due to fear of retaliation by gang members.

4.6.2 Theme 11: The power of professionals.

When discussing their experiences in gangs, many of the participants reflected that professionals had a lot of power to support them and facilitate positive change when they were affiliated with the gang. When the females interviewed discussed their experiences of desisting from the gang, some of the females reported that support from professionals had been beneficial in aiding their transition away from the gang as explored further in theme 9 (external agency support to leave).

Faith: “That is where TN (care home) comes into it... I was angry at the world... I just wanted to be loved... I needed a family ... I got allocated my key worker... she kinda became my Mum”

Maria: "I was put in contact with the most amazing youth worker. She helped me, found me somewhere safe to go, accommodation, money, education, everything, so I didn't have to go back to the gang."

However, some of the females interviewed reflected that the lack of professional support when they were affiliated with the gang, led to them becoming more involved in gang activity, thus making it harder to desist. It was suggested that often women and girls affiliated with gangs feel misunderstood and struggled to trust professionals.

Maria: "social services were involved but no one really knew what was going on ... you know better than to tell the social (social services) shit... She (social services worker) took us both out for pizza, like it was normal for a 13-year-old to be going out with an 18-year-old drug dealer."

Joy: "on my estate the last thing you want is the social sniffing around so you keep your mouth shut."

It is suggested that in some the females' experiences they may have been raised to be distrusting of professionals, which may have acted as a barrier to professionals gaining an accurate understanding of the experiences of these females and their communities.

Many of the participants also suggested that often there was a lack of understanding around who may be involved in gang activity, which meant that the women interviewed did not receive the help and support they required at the right time. Sophie, Faith and Simran reflected that because they were compliant at school and were not in trouble with teachers, they were less likely to be viewed as at risk of gang affiliation.

Sophie: "I was like a model student and because there was no sort of outwards bad behaviour or anything, I think I kinda slipped under everyone's radar ...I think because I wasn't causing any problems, people didn't have the tricky conversations that I needed to have and the red flags were ignored".

Faith: "I slipped through the system because I wasn't naughty, so you get left... no teachers at school would have believed I was in a gang ... they failed by not listening to what I wasn't saying"

Simran: "teachers at my school weren't from my ends (area) and didn't know what was going on there... they thought I was this goody two shoes... they wouldn't have thought I was carrying (a knife)."

They also suggested that often teachers are unaware of the activities that were occurring in the local community around the school as they lived in other locations, meaning that they may not understand the experiences that women and girls from that community are exposed to.

Overall, in summary, the participants' suggested that professionals held a lot of power to facilitate positive changes in young people's lives, but many of the females felt let down by the professionals and felt that their involvement sooner would have been instrumental in preventing their gang affiliation. They suggested though that often it may have been challenging for professionals to gain a true representation of what was occurring in their lives due to distrust or due to a lack of understanding around the risk factors that can lead females to become affiliated with gangs.

4.6.3 Theme 12: Youth naivety around gang relationships

When exploring the participants' experiences and perceptions of gang affiliation, many of the females reflected that there was a naivety around what it meant to be affiliated with the gang and what positive relationships (both peer and intimate) should look like.

Some of the participants reflected that they lacked understanding of what a positive relationship should look like and this ignorance made them vulnerable to exploitation by the gang.

Sophie: "I didn't know what a good relationship should look like.. So I didn't know what was normal or what to expect... only looking back have I realised that I was a victim and was groomed, and exploited and traumatised"

Joy: "They exploit you as they know you know no better and will do anything to be part of the group. When your home life is shit, you don't know what love and friendship should look like. You've lost before you've even started"

Faith: "I couldn't tell that I was being exploited at the time and thought I was looking after my own.... I was young and I was naïve and very, very vulnerable"

Simran: "I felt invincible, it's only when it's too late that you realise what's really going on".

Many of the participants suggested that if these positive relationships are not experienced in their family background or taught about at school, many women and girls may be unaware of what a positive relationship should look like. Therefore, this lack of understanding around healthy relationships may have left them more vulnerable to exploitation by the gang because they were seeking social and emotional connection with anyone who will provide them with attention (as described in theme 2: belonging and affection). Many of the women suggested that this may be problematic because they implied that often gang members may look to recruit vulnerable women and girls and may offer them affection and aspirational goods and experiences as a means of attracting them to the gang in the first place, as explored further in themes 2 (belonging and affection), 3 (aspirational lifestyle) and 5 (male manipulation and control).

Overall, the data set suggests that some of the participants may have lacked an understanding of what healthy relationships should look like which may have made them more vulnerable to exploitation. They reflected that often they were seeking emotional and social connection which was provided by the gang and that they only realised that they are being exploited later on in their affiliation, when it was harder to leave.

4.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter presents an overview of the results of this study. By following the process of reflexive thematic analysis, the data revealed many themes related to each of the research questions posed and some recurrent themes connecting the three questions.

The analysis demonstrates the interconnections between the themes and the impact of environmental, societal and personal factors on the participants' affiliation with gangs, relationships and desistance from gangs.

Their desire to seek affection and belonging, alongside gain an aspirational lifestyle was viewed as a factor that led many of the women to join gangs. These desires were often connected to past experiences in the home and/or community suggesting that gangs offer emotional, social and financial benefits that can be perceived as beneficial by young people.

It is suggested that once affiliated with the gang often the females' experiences and relationships with others were shaped by their gender characteristics. It was explored that often females demonstrating stereotypical feminine characteristics were deemed as lower status and having less power than males or females exhibiting stereotypical male characteristics. It was reflected by some participants that due to systemic factors surrounding the identification of gang members, often females were used within the gang to carry goods as they were less likely to be stopped by the police, raising concerns around the perceptions held by protective services such as the police around gang activity and affiliation. These concerns were also raised by the participants in relation to the power of professionals to support females involved or at risk of gang affiliation.

It was explored that often the participants were subjected to manipulation by males in the group and exposed to high levels of violence and abuse both in peer and intimate relationships. The women interviewed suggested that often women and girls were naïve to

the realities of gang relationships due to lack of knowledge around healthy relationships. It was explored that this naivety often left them more vulnerable to exploitation by the gang.

It was suggested that some of the participants had formed friendships with other females that had similarities to them in terms of roles, feelings, or characteristics, and in some cases these relationships had been protective.

In relation to leaving the gang, many of the females reflected that they wished to leave the gang often following a significant event, because this had led them to re-evaluate and wish to create a new identity. However, many of the women suggested that it was challenging to leave the gang due to the culture of fear and violence that was explicit in the gang and concerns around retaliation if they left. Many of the females reflected that they were only able to leave the gang if they left the area the gang operated in and often long-term desistance was only achieved if they were provided with holistic support from external agencies. It was explored that this support would need to pro-socially supplement the social, emotional, and financial supports that had led to the women becoming involved in the gang initially.

The detail of each of these themes and the implications are discussed in further detail in the discussion chapter.

5. Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Chapter overview

This chapter will initially present a summary of the findings in relation to each research question, and then will contextualise the data in relation to previous research and theory.

The methodology is critiqued, and personal researcher reflections offered, before the chapter closes with implications for individual work, systemic work, and future research.

5.2 Addressing the Research Questions

The current study aimed to address gaps in the field of gang research, particularly relating to a first person perspective from females who have been involved in gang activity. Five females who had previously been part of gangs were interviewed to explore their experiences and perceptions of gang affiliation. These findings intended to increase the knowledge and understanding in this field in relation to the three research questions:

What are the perceptions of females formerly affiliated with gangs, of their experiences within gangs, in relation to:

1. *joining gangs?*
2. *relationships in gangs?*
3. *desisting from the gang?*

The analysis chapter (chapter 4) outlines the findings based on the interviews and identified themes that captured their perceptions and experiences in relation to each of the three research questions. Within this chapter these findings will be related to the evidence existing in the area, with the aim of enhancing understanding and providing suggested implications around next steps both in the domain of research and in wider society.

5.2.1 Research question 1: Joining gangs

5.2.1.1 Summary of findings from the current research

When considering why females join gangs, the women interviewed suggested that often challenging family and life experiences increased the likelihood of women and girls joining gangs due to a range of factors. For some women, becoming affiliated with the gang was

viewed as a way of surviving and avoiding challenging life/ home environments, in terms of adverse family relationships, socio-economic deprivation and difficult life experiences.

It was interpreted that females may be attracted to gangs because they offered emotional and social connection. It was implied that this connection may be desirable because the members of the gang were viewed as role models. Therefore, affiliation was perceived to be attractive because they would be associated with high status, 'important' individuals.

It was also explored that a connection with anyone may be viewed as desirable if the women and girls lacked social and emotional support elsewhere in their lives. It was also suggested that challenging family and/or life experiences may increase the likelihood of females joining gangs if the activities were similar to those experienced previously such as gang and family connections with criminal activity. Both Maria and Faith reflected that criminality was part of their normal family life and that gang affiliation offered similarities to home. For example, Maria stated that she'd "been hiding shit under my bed for my family and disposing of stuff all my life so it felt normal".

Gang activity was also viewed as aspiration for some women if their affiliation with the gang was viewed as desirable due to tangible rewards such as money, goods, and experiences. Maria stated that she was attracted to the gang because "you wanted to be part of that and to have a slice of all the stuff they had, like the trainers, the party invites... It was every kids dream." It was suggested that gang affiliation may therefore be viewed as aspirational because it offered a more exciting and lavish life that the women were currently experiencing or if it was viewed as aspirational because it provided a means of gaining an income.

Many of the females reflected that often gang activity was visible in the community and the 'wealth' of members was obvious in terms of goods, but also status and power in the community. Joy stated that the gang members had "all the status, the power, the respect

these people have on the street and also the fear that they command... there's a lot of money around... which is hard to resist". It was implied that this visibility enhanced the likelihood of young people in that community becoming affiliated with gangs because the opportunities to become part of the group were harder to avoid and for some women, gang affiliation was viewed as inevitable life course. This likelihood was perceived to have increased further if their experiences of parenting were overprotective or mostly absent.

5.2.1.2 Situating the current research

When considering why women and girls become affiliated with gang, the participants identified both individual and societal factors that influenced their association. Individual factors relate to the individual woman's personal characteristics and life experiences, whereas societal factors relate to wider factors in the community and in wider society that influence their individual experiences and perceptions.

In terms of societal factors, status, power, and respect were cited as factors which motivated some of the females interviewed to join the gangs. Therefore, this may suggest that within their communities, there may a perceived lack of opportunities or alternative methods of gaining status, power, and respect. For some females these aspirational attributes were perceived to be associated with forming connections with males in the gang, whereas for other women they wished to gain these attributes themselves. For some women, there appeared to be a sense of inevitability around women growing up in certain areas becoming involved in gangs, because gang affiliation was normalised within the community and their appeared to be a lack of alternative viable options.

Many of the females reflected that they were attracted to the gang as a method of getting their emotional, social and/or financial needs met. These findings support previous research that suggested that females affiliated with gangs are more likely to face disproportionate levels of adversity prior to gang involvement. This is supported by previous research found in

the Systemic literature review suggesting that females become affiliated with gangs due to a lack of alternative options to gain income (Beckett et al., 2013; Choak, 2018; Couper, 2016; Elliott, 2012; Firmin, 2010; Walter, 1999) and/or to form social relationships (Beckett et al., 2013; Choak, 2018; Couper, 2016; Elliott, 2012; Firmin, 2010; The Centre for Social Justice & XLP, 2013; Walter, 1999). This therefore suggests that having access to emotional, social, and financial support from pro-social support mechanisms may be a protective factor preventing young females from becoming involved with gangs, as they may be less likely to turn to the gang to meet these needs.

In terms of individual factors, many of the participants described a desire to find a sense of belonging which was often absent in many of the females lives, and this sense of belonging was cited as a reason why many of the women joined and stayed affiliated with the gang. Within the current study, gang affiliation was described as providing emotional and social belonging and support which was often not available in other areas of their life. Therefore, gang affiliation offered escapism from social marginalisation for many of the participants. Often the gang was viewed as an alternative family, an idea that is consistent with previous research which suggests that the gang can provide a sense of belonging and companionship (Beckett et al., 2013; Choak, 2018; Couper, 2016; Elliott, 2012; Firmin, 2010; The Centre for Social Justice & XLP, 2013; Walter, 1999).

The findings suggest that the attraction of gang affiliation is fluid and evolves over time, often in response to social structures and pressures. Social Control Theory (Hirschi, 1969) could be used to imply that women and girls may be influenced to become affiliated with gangs due to adversity in the home and community environment, alongside complex interpersonal relationships. Thornberry (2003) suggest that within these environments it may be more common for parents to have fewer resources to monitor their children, or that they may be less present due to additional pressures. This theory and study were conducted from a male gang perspective, but the findings from the current study, suggest that challenging home and/or life experiences may act as a catalyst providing the opportunity for women to become involved in gangs which is consistent with factors discussed in Social Control Theory (Hirschi,

1969). However, within the current sample the participants came from a range of socioeconomic, ethnic and family backgrounds. Three of the participants were white British, one participant was of mixed: Pakistani/ White British heritage and one participant was of mixed: White British and black Caribbean heritage. Additionally, Sophie spoke about coming from an affluent family and that her challenging home experiences were because of parental pressure and control. Social control theory offers suggested implications for females in gangs, however, is positioned from a white British male dominated perspective, and focuses predominately on individual's from working class backgrounds. Therefore, Social control theory alone would not adequately explain female gang membership and a more interactive approach is required considering the range of factors why females may become affiliated.

One model that may more holistically explain why females become gang involved is The Adjusted Unified Model of Gang membership (Mozova, 2017). This model suggests that individuals become involved with gangs due to personal characteristics, social factors and environmental factors influencing their social cognition around gangs. Their social cognition relates to their perception of gangs and the opportunities the gang may offer. Mozova, (2017) suggests that if an individual has a positive social cognition of gangs and has the opportunity for peer selection of gang members through proximity to the gang, they are more likely to become affiliated.

Considering the current sample, females were frequently exposed to gang affiliated peers within the context of an intimate personal group or within the community. Gang affiliation was perceived as aspirational for some women, suggesting that they formed a positive social cognition of gang association. Affiliation in a gang was reported to provide females with a sense of acceptance, belonging and familial obligation. This could suggest that their personal characteristics, social factors, and their environment influenced their formation of their positive social cognition. For example, some participants spoke of the gang being viewed as role models, or of wishing to join the gang to escape family factors or to form relationships. When considering their affiliation, it could be described as a progressive experience where contact with the gang increased over time, as opposed to an instant decision to join. Therefore, this suggests that peer selection and proximity to the gang

provides the opportunity for females to become affiliated. As such The Adjusted Unified Model of Gang membership (Mozova, 2017) could provide an adequate explanation of why females become affiliated with gangs.

Furthermore, linking in with the Adjusted Unified Model (Mozova, 2017), this may suggest that women and girls may develop a favourable perception of opportunities associated with gang affiliation, such as social belonging, social acceptance, social status, protection and financial security that they perceive to be 'impossible' via other methods, and that these factors increase the likelihood of their affiliation.

5.2.2 Research question 2: Relationships in gangs

5.2.2.1 Summary of findings from the current research

When exploring women and girls' relationships with other members of the gang, it was suggested that their relationships with males in the group was mediated by their perceived gender characteristics (in terms of stereotypical gender expectations) and that these characteristics influenced their status and power and the roles they possessed in the gang.

It was suggested that stereotypical females were often viewed as lower status than males and were subjected to sexual violence and manipulation by males in the gang. Typically, women with these characteristics were reported to hold goods for the gang or perform a sexual role. Sophie reflected that women with these characteristics were "treated like meat They saw women as baby machines or sex objects, that they are people that could like hide stuff".

In contrast, females who adopted a stereotypical masculine persona were viewed with more status and power and this was viewed as a protective factor against sexual violence. It was reflected that often masculinity was associated with the woman's ability to fight and be feared due to their violence. Maria reflected that women wouldn't "get respect from them unless you become like them... to gain acceptance, girls must adopt a more masculine persona". Women who were viewed as having more masculine characteristics were reported to be involved with more violent and criminally positioned roles in the gang.

It was explored that often women and girls' relationships with males with the gang changed over the course of the affiliation. It was reflected that often at the start of their affiliation, they were often cared for and given lavish gifts and exposed to exciting experiences, potentially as a method of gaining their affection and loyalty. It was suggested that often these methods were used at the start to encourage females to join the gang and to ensure that gang affiliation is viewed as desirable. However, once the women and girls were part of the gang their relationships were reported to become more controlling, manipulative, and violent. This was reflected by Sophie who stated that her boyfriend showered her with compliments at the start and that this encouraged her to become affiliated with the gang initially but that her treatment changed after her affiliation: "he said that I was beautiful...He protected me and he made me feel safe, and that was just what I needed at the moment. He was quite controlling, he wanted to know where I was all the time ...He'd be telling me that I'm fat, ugly and crazy and worthless".

Many of the women reflected that this treatment was normalised and suggested that within the gang there was a culture of violence and fear. Often the violence described was sexual in nature and threats towards the women and their families was commonplace, making leaving the gang difficult due to fear of the repercussions of their actions. Joy stated that "You know if you step a foot wrong, you will lose your respect and bad things will happen to you", highlighting that fear was used by many of the gangs discussed to control women and force compliance.

Regarding female relationships with other females, it was reflected that often women formed friendships with females who has similar characteristics or roles to them in the gang.

5.2.2.2 Situating the current research

5.2.2.2.1 Roles and relationships in gangs

The females interviewed suggested that women's access to, and position within, the patriarchal gang environment is predominantly mediated and determined by their relationships with males in the gang. Many of the participants suggested that within the mixed gender gangs described, females were positioned within the hierarchy of the gang subordinate to their male counterparts and the roles they adopted were directly based on the foundations of this patriarchal hierarchy. This is consistent with previous research suggesting that female gang members are typically "defined solely in terms of their . . . relations to male gang members" (Campbell, 1990, p.166). This gender imbalance in the gang hierarchy is consistent with governmental narrative such as the one expressed in '*Gangs and Group Offending Guidance for Schools*' issued by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (2008). The report claims that females and young women "are subservient in male gangs and even submissive, sometimes being used to carry weapons or drugs, sometimes using their sexuality as a passport or being sexually exploited, e.g., in initiation rituals, in revenge by rival gangs or where a younger group of females sexually service older male gang members' (DCSF, 2008, p.7). The current research suggest that this notion may be accurate for females who are perceived to have stereotypical feminine qualities, but fails to recognise that for some women, they may choose to adopt a stereotypically masculine persona and that for these types of women in gangs, their roles and status is define more frequently on their ability to fight and use violence.

Linking to this notion, the participants reflected that within the gang three distinct types of female characteristics and roles were described and the role allocated influenced their treatment and relationships with other members of the gang. This supports research around the roles typically associated with females in UK gangs (Beckett et al., 2013; Choak, 2018; Elliott, 2012; Firmin, 2010; The Centre for Social Justice & XLP, 2013).

The first role described related to stereotypically feminine members who were described to have the role of a sexual object to the male gang members. This role was typically associated with women who were described as physically attractive and unable to fight. Additionally, within this role, women and girls were described to assist gang members to commit offenses

by acting as lookouts, distractions and/ or honey traps, consistent with previous research (Choak, 2018; Couper, 2016; Elliott, 2012; Firmin, 2010; The Centre for Social Justice & XLP, 2013). Most of the participants interviewed had this role in the gang and consistently described scenarios where they were controlled and coerced by male gang members to comply with their requests. It was perceived that as a group of females they were more likely to be viewed as having lost their right to consent to or decline sexual activity and were thus more likely to experience sexual violence and exploitation.

The second type of role described related to females who adopted stereotypically masculine characteristics, adopting a male persona, and involving themselves in crime and violent activity; adopting this role was described as a conscious choice by women. Some of the participants interviewed reflected that they had this role within the gang and subsequently were more accepted and respected by the males in the gang and were more likely to make decisions without male approval. Women and girls who adopted these roles had the highest status of females in the gang hierarchy and it was often reflected that this status was a protective factor against sexual violence. For females adopting this more masculine role, within their narrative they were more likely to emphasise the high level of intra-female physical violence. This is consistent with previous research reporting a high level of female-on-female violence typically by women who displayed more masculine characteristics (Choak, 2018). The current research and previous research suggested that often this violence would consist of attacking females from other gangs (Beckett et al., 2013; Choak, 2018; Couper, 2016; Elliott, 2012; Firmin, 2010; Walter, 1999) or their own gang if individuals had been talking to professionals (Beckett et al., 2013; Choak, 2018; Couper, 2016; Elliott, 2012; Firmin, 2010; Walter, 1999).

The third role that was described in limited detail related to females who were in a long-term relationship with a male gang member, known as 'wifeys' (a term used by some of the participants and in the literature). 'Wifeys' were described to typically protect their partners from the repercussions of gang affiliation by concealing illegal goods and eliminating evidence. Additionally, it was explored by some participants that they were exposed to domestic violence and sexual

exploitation first hand or as a bystander. Pitts (2006) described that often 'wifeys' may be stuck in abusive relationships with high levels of male dominance and control, which could include facilitating sexual assault of their partner by other members of the gang; this was an experience described by some of the participants.

When considering female relationships with other females, it was reflected that often women formed friendships with females who had similar characteristics or roles to them in the gang. This supports previous research by Alleyne and Wood (2010) which suggested that individuals form peer connections with individuals they perceive to have similar characteristics and similar circumstances to themselves, or with peers who possess characteristics they wish to adopt. Mozova (2017)'s Adjusted Unified Model of Gang membership also suggested that relationships with peers with similar characteristics may reinforce gang affiliation due to high perceived social belonging, increased perceived social status and power, and alignment with group social norms.

5.2.2.2 Sexual violence and control within gangs

The findings of this study and previous research suggest that gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation is influenced both by cultural norms within the gang environment and wider patterns of sexual exploitation and violence within the women's life. The subordinate nature of female gang members' relationships to their male counterparts suggests that males within the gang hold the authority and that the female's compliance with their requests (often due to fear) encourages patriarchal dominance that may increase their risk of both sexual and physical violence. Whilst recognising that each of the participants were reflecting on their own gang environments, it is viewed that a females hierarchical positioning in the gang (in terms of their role and perceived femininity) was viewed as having a bearing upon their risk of exposure to sexual violence. It is suggested that this may be because their roles within the gang may have been determined by their perceived sexual desirability, but also their ability to assert their own agency in a situation. This may suggest why women who adopted stereotypically masculine personas in the gang were less likely to be subjected to sexual violence, because due to their increased status they may have been more able to assert their own agency and may have possibly been viewed as less sexually desirable. These findings are

supported by previous UK research in this field suggesting that females reported as a 'gangster girl', were described as having masculine traits, being violent and being actively involved in the daily activities of the gang and were less likely to report experiences of personal sexual assault (Beckett et al., 2013; Choak, 2018; Elliott, 2012; The Centre for Social Justice & XLP, 2013).

It was suggested that females experienced double victimisation (Choak, 2018) as they were often harmed and blamed for the sexual violence. It was explored that within gangs there is often a high level of sexual violence, which is normalised and commonplace. It was reported that females adopting a more sexual role for the gang possess the lowest status in the gang, were objectified and commonly referred to in derogatory terms by their fellow male and female members. Some of the females in the current study used the term "link" to describe sexualised females and Faith suggested that "if you can fight, you're on road, if you can't your just another hole mate", implying that some women's identities in the gang were connected to their sexual objectification. This raised concerns around the perceived lack of understanding around consent, and the factors impacting on a woman's ability to grant or withhold consent within the gang environment. It also raised concerns around the support provided for females in the gang after they had experienced sexual assault, because the narratives described were that women brought these experiences upon themselves. Additionally, women described consciously distancing them from women who adopted sexual roles as a method of protecting themselves from similar harm, further ostracising women and girls who had been subjected to sexual violence and posing implications for the likelihood of them disclosing and seeking support following abuse. These findings are similar to those reported in previous research, as many of the females exposed to sexual violence and exploitation reported feeling blamed for causing their experiences (Beckett et al., 2013; Couper, 2016; Elliott, 2012; Firmin, 2010; The Centre for Social Justice & XLP, 2013; Walter, 1999), which was also reflected by some of the women in the current study.

It is suggested that the mixture of heightened objectification and disempowerment of many women, combined with the sense of control and patriarchal power afforded to males whereby female experiences are determined and shaped by males in the gang, results in a

high-risk environment, whereby sexual violence and exploitation towards women and girls is normalised.

Some of the women described having a lack of understanding around healthy relationships, which they reflected may have made them more vulnerable to exploitation. They suggested that often due to challenging home backgrounds and lack of positive relationships with peers and/or family members they may have been less able to identify 'red flags' within their own relationships with members of the gang. The Adjusted Unified Model of Gang membership (Mozova, 2017) could help explain why this occurs due to previous home and life experiences leading females to develop a social cognition of relationships, which may reflect relationships in their lives which may be labelled as 'unhealthy' or challenging. These findings support previous research highlighted in the systemic literature review which suggested that relationships within the gang were complex and controlling. Many of the studies highlighted that often females felt controlled by male members of the gang (Beckett et al., 2013; Choak, 2018; Elliott, 2012; Firmin, 2010; Walter, 1999). These perceptions were similar to experiences raised by many of the females in the current study.

5.2.2.2.3 Systemic exploration

Within the current research, there was evidence to suggest that females were viewed as an important part of the gangs' structure. It is suggested that the roles women and girls adopt are important and could only be conducted by females, such as acting as lookouts, distractions, and honey-traps. Systemically, it is suggested that females are recruited by gangs because women were perceived to be less likely to be challenged by police or viewed as a threat by potential victims to crimes. This notion is supported by previous research which documented that females are approximately 80% less likely to be stopped and searched by the police than male members (Bradford et al., 2013), further implying that females are valued by gangs as they are less likely to get caught concealing illegal items. This raised concerns related to current understanding around who may be part of gangs within professional bodies, as many females also described being hidden from professionals (such

as social care and teachers) because their personal characteristics were contrasted the stereotypical image of gang members. Therefore, suggesting that a wider understanding around the systemic and individual risk factors that may lead females to join gangs is needed amongst professionals.

5.2.3 Research question 3: Desisting from the gang

5.2.3.1 Summary of findings from the current research

In relation to females desisting from gang affiliation, it is suggested that many of the females wished to leave the gang following a life changing event. Some of the life events discussed were pregnancy, medical issues, being incarcerated or being moved to a children's care home. It was suggested that these life altering events, may lead women and girls to re-evaluate their gang affiliation and wish to form a new identity away from the gang. For example, Maria stated that she "didn't want to live like this anymore" after finding out she was pregnant, and Faith reflected that she "needed to change" after overdosing.

It was reflected that leaving the gang was challenging due to high levels of fear of retaliation by the gang and/or often a lack of opportunities to leave and form a new life. Many of the women reflected feeling that they couldn't leave the gang due to high levels of fear. Moving out of the geographical area was viewed as an important step in leaving the gang and was suggested to be a method of ensuring the female's welfare if they left. Sophie reflected that "We were all so scared of the retaliation of the gang that it was the only safe thing to do".

It was suggested that being provided with a high level of holistic support from external professionals or family members (not in the gang) was required to support women in their desistence and to ensure they were able to form a new identity separate from the gang. Maria reflected that professional support provided her with "somewhere safe to go, accommodation, money, education, everything, so I didn't have to go back to the gang." It was implied that to ensure desistence the factors that led the women and girls to

become affiliated needed to be supplemented by pro social groups, such as support groups, financial assistance, safe housing and access to education and employment.

5.2.3.2 Situating the current research

Within the domain for gang research, there has been little research considering women's experiences of leaving gangs in the UK. Literature on general criminal desistance has been used previously to provide potential insight into why individuals leave gangs. These factors had included marriage, employment, parenthood, and other life course events (Decker and Lauritsen, 2002).

Within the current research it was suggested that women often leave the gang following a large life event, which may be consistent with the above factors. Importantly it was suggested that the life event led women to re-evaluate their affiliation and wish to form an identity away from the gang, suggesting that this self-reflection is the crucial element, and the life event is the catalyst for this reflection. It is suggested that following these events, the women may have been influenced to make rational choice to leave based on the assessment of risk and a desire to avoid future conflict, depending on the life event. Rational choice theory (Hechter & Kanazawa, 1997) suggests that individuals will make an informed decision whether or not to commit a crime by weighing up the costs and benefits. Using this theory, it is suggested that following a life changing event, women assess the risks and perceived benefits of remaining in the gang and as a result choose to leave the gang. The current research suggests that rational choice theory offers a way of conceptualising how women may make the initial decision to leave the gang, but that often due to fear of reprisals from the gang it fails to account for how this process of desistance is achieved.

When considering the process of desistance, the females interviewed described the process of leaving the gang and remaining out of the gang as dangerous and complex. This fits with previous research which found that leaving the gang was a risky and complicated process due to the culture of fear within the gang; (Beckett et al., 2013; Choak, 2018; Couper, 2016; Elliott, 2012; Firmin, 2010; Walter, 1999). It was reflected that women and girls who left the gang were at heightened risk of

harm. Some of the women interviewed described experiencing threats and, in some cases, violence and injury when considering leaving the gang or after they had left. It is suggested that the culture of violence within the gang increases fear amongst women surrounding their treatment if they try to leave. Therefore, the heightened risk associated with leaving the gang may act as a barrier to some women leaving the gang.

Within the current research, it was suggested to support desistance females needed to be provided with a high level of holistic support from external professionals or family members to ensure they were able to form a new identity separate from the gang. These findings are supported by Alleyne and Wood (2010), who argued that for desistance from gang affiliation to occur the individual needs to recognise that there is a new and different way to gain 'social control' through a non-criminal path or pro-social opportunities. Frisby-Osman (2019) suggest that social control is often achieved by the woman gaining legal employment, forming relationships outside the gang, and/or becoming a parent. They suggest that if these pro-'social controls' are reinforced (such as advances in employment) then desistance is more likely to continue, which was reflected by the participants because the emotional, social and financial support provided by the gang was supplemented by pro-social means.

5.2.4 Summary of the findings

The current research and previous research surrounding female affiliation in the UK, suggests that female experiences in joining, affiliation and desistance from the gang differ from those experiences of males, particularly in relation to their treatment (respect, power, and abuse) and relationships with others in the gang. This research demonstrates the interconnections between the themes and the impact of environmental, societal and personal factors on the participants' affiliation with gangs, relationships and desistance from gangs in relation to female affiliation within the UK and offers validity to models such as The Adjusted Unified Model of Gang membership (Mozova, 2017).

The current study adds to the research evidence around females in UK gangs to suggest that their desire to seek affection and belonging, alongside gain an aspirational lifestyle was viewed as a factor that led many of the women to join gangs. These desires were often connected to challenging life/ home experiences.

In relation to female's experiences and relationships with others in the gang, the current findings suggest that their experiences were influenced by their perceived gender characteristics and subsequently their roles in the gang. The current study supports evidence to suggest that often females demonstrating stereotypical feminine characteristics were deemed as lower status and having less power than males or females exhibiting stereotypical male characteristics. It was explored that often females exhibiting these feminine characteristics were more likely to be subjected to manipulation and abusive experiences by males in the group.

In relation to leaving the gang, many of the females reflected that they wished to leave the gang often following a significant event, because this had led them to re-evaluate and wish to create a new identity. However, many of the women suggested that it was challenging to leave the gang due to the culture of fear and violence that was explicit in the gang and concerns around retaliation if they left.

5.3 Critical review

This part of the chapter aims to evaluate the strengths and limitations of this study to ensure that the data is contextually situated before drawing any conclusions or implications.

5.3.1 Evaluation of the research

Qualitative research adopts a different approach to quantitative research (Elliot et al, 1999), therefore the current study will be evaluated based on Yardley's four principles for

qualitative research (Yardley, 2008): sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance; alongside Braun and Clarke's (2022) 15-point checklist for good thematic analysis.

5.3.1.1 Sensitivity to context

Within the current study, the researcher aimed to be sensitive to the context throughout all stages of the research process.

Throughout the data collection process, analysis, and interpretations the researcher ensured sensitivity in various ways. In creating the interview schedule, advice and guidance was sought from a woman that had previously been affiliated with gangs to ensure to ensure that the questions were sensitively framed (Appendix E). The researcher had an awareness that the topics discussed may be emotionally sensitive, therefore interviews were conducted in a place the interviewees felt chose, check ins were conducted throughout the interview and after the interviews. The researcher aimed to be reflexive throughout the research process using a reflective research diary (Appendix D), and the influence of their own assumptions and bias was considered throughout the research and within the write up of the study.

5.3.1.2 Commitment and rigour

In demonstrating validity in qualitative research, Yardley (2008) states that the study must demonstrate thoroughness. This was shown at all stages of the research process. Within the recruitment process, participants were recruited in line with ethical approval from the ethics board (Appendix H) and in line with the exclusion and inclusion criteria created. Within the interviews, the researcher was attentive and aimed to ensure that their perceptions and experiences were captured within the analysis to ensure their voices were elevated; this was indicated by the richness of data captured.

Rigour was established by ensuring that the participants interviewed had relevant experiences for the research questions and prior conversations were had with participants to ensure this was the case. It is felt that the extracts used within the analysis demonstrate this rigour and are representative of the themes presented.

5.3.1.3 Transparency and coherence

Using Braun and Clarke's (2022) 15- point checklist to ensure good quality Thematic Analysis allowed the researcher to demonstrate transparency and coherence at all stages in the research process. This checklist was followed throughout the analysis process to ensure that the process was rigorous, systematic, and reflexive. An outline of the steps can be found in table 9 (section 3.9) and how these would be adhered to is presented in the methodology section. Evidence of the steps adopted has been evidenced, including an annotated extract from the transcript (Appendix G), evidence of theme development (Appendix G) and an extract of the reflective journal used in the research process (Appendix D). Additionally, the researcher utilised support from a data analysis group with other Trainee Educational Psychologist researchers, whereby reflection and discussions around the process of qualitative analysis were discussed. The group were also utilised to ensure thematic labels were representative of the codes generated. University supervision with a tutor was also utilised to test out analytic ideas and to offer critique and new ideas throughout the research process.

5.3.1.4 Impact and importance

The current study fulfilled this principle, by researching an under researched area, with an under researched population with the aim of contributing to the understanding of females' perceptions and experiences of gang affiliation. The data captured was rich in detail and the researcher aimed to capture within the analysis important and useful insights that may offer implications for professionals working with females at risk of, or with experiences of gang affiliation. It is hoped that the range of professionals this understanding may benefit will be vast and will include multiple agencies including law enforcement, educationalists, psychologists, and support services both in the community and local authority. Further evidence of the importance and potential impact of this study is explored further in section 5.4.

5.3.2 Methodological critique

A critique of the current study relates to the small sample size. The current sample of five participants does fit with Slavin and Smith's, (2009) recommendations for sample sizes for professional doctoral research, however with limited research in this domain it could be argued that a larger sample size may have provided further insight and a broader range of perceptions and experiences of gang affiliation. Within the recruitment process, there were numerous challenges related to identifying and accessing women and girls previously affiliated with gangs, and these challenges have been described by previous researchers in this field (Choak, 2018). These challenges may be associated with women not wishing to discuss past gang affiliation because they have formed a new identity away from the gang or that for some women they may not have identified with the notion of being affiliated with gangs. Additionally, it was felt that using community providers to recruit participants may have also acted as a barrier because the current research suggests that there may be misconceptions around the characteristics of females affiliated with gangs or misconceptions around what being affiliated with a gang means, despite the research offering definitions and clarification around this.

It is also recognised that the women interviewed all demonstrated a willingness to discuss their experiences with the researcher and had formed positive lives following leaving the gang. It was felt that this may be due to the support the women had received to leave and following leaving the gang. It could be argued that women who had not received the same level of support or had the same experiences following desistance may have had differing perceptions and accounts of their affiliations with the gang. This may be particularly important considering that gang affiliation and the activities they may have been involved or subjected to may be stigmatised by wider society. Therefore, the experiences and perceptions of gang affiliation discussed in the current study may not be a representation of all women affiliated with gangs and thus this research does not claim to be generalisable to all females who have been affiliated with gangs.

Additionally, despite the data generated being rich, all the participants were recalling events retrospectively, with one participant describing experiences of joining a gang 14 years ago. This research is focused on participants recalling past life events rather than currently living those experiences. Therefore, it is noted that there may be inaccuracies in their narratives due to their perceptions changing over time, issues with recall of events and introspection with maturity. Additionally, the narratives presented may have been subjected to post-hoc rationalisation by the participants, whereby following experiences individuals often try to rationalise and understand how and why events occurred, which may alter their perceptions of the experience. However, by adopting a critical realist epistemological stance, it is accepted that there is an objective truth, but individuals conceptualise different perspectives of this truth, and offer differing interpretations of the truth based on their lived context, which may alter over time and with life experiences.

It is also noted that experiences of gangs within the current decade may differ from those described 10+ years ago, particularly considering the advances in technology and the impact that the covid-19 pandemic may have had on gang affiliation. Therefore, this study may offer insight into female's experiences and perceptions of gangs between 2008 and 2018 (the range of involvement discussed in this study). It is felt that possibly the findings in this

study may reflect female gang affiliation in the current day, however it is acknowledged that due to the covid-19 pandemic gang affiliation and activity may have evolved which may alter the current understanding of gang affiliation more generally. This notion is supported by research by Newbury et al., (2020) and Singh et al., (2020) who suggested that during the pandemic and lockdowns, gang activity and recruitment methods adapted. Their papers suggested that recruitment of young people to gangs had evolved to use social media and other forms of technology to demonstrate the perceived attractive nature of gang affiliation, such as through rap and drill videos online. They suggested that for some individuals their parents were more likely to be classed as key workers in the pandemic such as NHS, care, retail, or factory staff. Therefore, implying that their parents may have been less present in the home at this time, whilst the young people were more likely to be home for longer periods of time, increasing their likelihood of engaging in gang related activity in their local community due to lack of other opportunities for social connection or 'fun'.

They also suggested that during lockdown, young people were more at risk of gang affiliation because the support and agencies that typically helped to identify young people at risk or involved with gangs reduced due to the closure of schools and youth centres. Therefore, young people were more likely to be exploited by gangs during the pandemic due to lockdown concealing them from support services and prevention agencies. These factors were not explored in the current study but is considered within the implications of this research.

Considering the implications of the covid-19 pandemic, 4 out of the 5 interviews were conducted virtually, which was not ideal considering the sensitive nature of the topics discussed and it is acknowledged that this may have influenced the data collected. The researcher aimed to ensure that participants felt at ease and able to share their narratives online by meeting virtually prior to the interview (to reduce any anxiety around meeting the researcher and check for technological issues), used narrative tools to aid discussions and offered a follow up call post interview.

5.3.3 Personal Reflexivity

In line with the expectations when conducting reflective Thematic Analysis, the researcher's reflexive journal was an aid to help maintain their reflexive position (Appendix D).

One of the reasons that led the researcher to conduct this research was based on personal experiences of lacking understanding and knowledge around female gang affiliation as an educational professional and as a trainee Educational Psychologist. The researcher was aware that in this role and in previous roles, professionals contribute an important role in identifying and supporting young women who may be involved or at risk of gang affiliation. The researcher felt that to inform this understanding it was vital that female voices were heard and captured within research on gangs, and support services guided by females with an understanding of this area.

At times the researcher found balancing their interpretation of the participants accounts and their own experiences and understanding as a psychologist and as an individual in society challenging. Supervision from the University and support from other Trainee Educational Psychology students was used to ensure reflexivity and provide challenge and guidance when needed. Additionally, the research tried to remain inductive in their analysis, but acknowledges that the themes generated from the systematic literature review may have influenced the analysis generated from the current study.

Throughout the research process, recruitment was challenging, which the researcher feels highlights the hidden nature of females affiliated with gangs and the potentially hard to reach nature of this population of women and girls.

Within the interviews, the researcher was continually amazed by the women's resilience, strength, and determination to thrive despite challenging past experiences, and the importance of capturing their experiences to help inform services and ensure that effective

support is universally available in the UK for all women. One of the women interviewed described her experiences as a “victim, survivor and thriver” which struck the researcher as describing the transition from joining to desistance and the future away from gangs perceptively, hence the name of the thesis.

Throughout the research process, the researcher reflected on the similarities and differences between the participants and the research may have influenced the data generated. It was reflected that many of the women spoke about challenging relationships with males and the abuse they had been subjected to. It struck the reader that if there had been a male researcher, the experiences described may not have been spoken about or may have been described differently. The researcher also reflected on their own life experiences and how these may be similar or different to those of the participants. It was also reflected that the researcher’s race, and ethnicity may have influenced the data generated, and that being a white middle class professional may have created barriers which meant that some experiences were not discussed.

5.3.4 Overall strength of the study

Overall, the current study offers a high quality, qualitative insight into the experiences and perceptions of females who have been affiliated with gangs in the UK. The researcher has adopted a reflective thematic analysis approach and has aimed to adhere to guidance around conducting high quality reflective thematic analysis and qualitative data to present rich and coherent analysis and discussion.

5.4 Implications and recommendations

5.4.1 Implications on an individual level

The current research highlights that many of the females experienced distress and adversity during their affiliation with gangs, but also prior and post affiliation. Many of the women

spoke of experiences of abuse in their family and in the gang, and how fear of retaliation from the gang made leaving challenging. This implies that individual support needs to be provided both preventatively and for intervention purposes for women and girls involved or at risk of affiliation.

The current study suggested that many women joined the gang because of the perceived benefits of affiliation, including financial gains. This therefore suggests that support with finances to prevent involvement, alongside providing viable and visible methods of gaining financial income and support through pro-social means, such as apprenticeships and training grants. This study also suggests that interventions should be offered to women at transition points in their lives, such as in pregnancy, medical intervention, bereavement, because at these transition points females may be more likely to evaluate their current lives and wish to desist from affiliation.

Many of the women also spoke of being attracted to the gang as it offered social and emotional support. This therefore suggests that within community's further investment is needed in services and groups specifically designed for women and girls, to act preventatively and offer interventions to supplement the support gang affiliation may be perceived to provide. This may include mentoring by individuals with an understanding of the community or with prior experiences of gang affiliation.

In addition, some of the participants spoke of the role of the family in influencing their experiences of gang association, both as an influence towards gang affiliation and as a protective factor aiding desistance. This suggests that family work could be beneficial to prevent women and girls from becoming involved with gangs, or to become re-involved. However, the current research indicates that this work would need to be conducted by an appropriate individual because many of the participants spoke of a distrust of professionals.

When considering individual and family support the current research highlights that individuals should not make assumptions about the experiences of females affiliated with gangs. Therefore, in line with a community psychology approach (Orford, 1992), women and girls should be involved in developing services that address the issues they feel need addressing, in the most appropriate way to meet their needs. This approach should also be adopted when considering systemic implications of the current research.

5.4.1 Implications on a systemic level

Many of the females interviewed in the current study identified that they had experienced negative relationships with males in the gang. In terms of preventative systemic work, work looking at exploring and targeting sexist attitudes towards females across genders is required. Additionally, preventative policies aimed at educating young people about healthy relationships and consent is required. It is felt that this work would need to be developed and delivered in a way that is engaging for all young people and is relevant across all communities and cultures.

The current research and previous studies in the field, highlight that often women and girls are hidden from support services due to a lack of understanding around the factors and risks that may lead females to become affiliated with gangs. Longfield (2019) estimated that around 27,000 English young people (all genders) are active members of a gang, with a further 60,000 young people being linked to gang activity through siblings, peers or other family members. However, only 6560 of these young people are known to Children's Services. This therefore highlights that better understanding around gang affiliation is vital to ensure more effective targeting of resources both preventatively and in interventions to support women and girls, alongside increased acknowledgment of female gang affiliation in wider governmental policies and initiatives. It is highlighted that support for females needs to focus on providing emotional and social support in a pro-social domain and to expose females to pro-social role models within their community.

Work to raise awareness around the risk factors and signs to look out for in females who may be involved or at risk of gang affiliation needs to also include a range of professionals, including educationalists, law enforcement and psychologists. Part of this work may include raising awareness that females have a role in UK gangs, that this role may be varied and that the signs of affiliation in females may differ to males. This work needs to be evolving based on the views of females and future research in this area to ensure that professionals develop an awareness and understanding of the risk factors and signs of gang affiliation in females and are then able to work in a multiagency way to provide support. Considering the domain of Educational Psychology, Educational Psychologists may offer a unique contribution of being able to work across systems to provide training and support to community, school, police, and local authority groups around female gang affiliation. Additionally, often Educational Psychologists work with young people who may have a range of vulnerabilities, and therefore an understanding of the risk factors and signs of gang affiliation in females may be helpful in their direct work and formulation around functions of behaviour and intervention support.

Preventative and intervention support needs to be multiagency across statutory and non-statutory sectors to ensure that agencies are working together to identify and support females who were involved or at risk of gang affiliation to ensure that appropriate support for women and girls is available across the UK. It is important that women and girls should be involved in developing these services to support women to ensure that they meet the needs of the females they support and meet the needs of different and diverse communities across the UK, as the current research demonstrates that females affiliated with gangs have varied backgrounds.

5.4.2 Implications for future research

Female affiliation with gangs is an under-researched area and despite the current study, further research is required in this area to develop understanding around females' experiences of gang affiliation. One potential area of this research, which was considered as

a research question for the current study, surrounds the impact of race, ethnicity, and culture on gang association. It is suggested that exploring the impact of race, ethnicity and culture may aid understanding from a diverse perspective.

The role of gender and the impact on relationships in the group was explored in this study and experiences of sexism were found to be common in the gangs discussed. Further research looking at sexism in gangs, possibly in a comparative study of males and female's views may aid understanding in this area. Research exploring this could help inform interventions and systemic changes related to gender and sexism in wider society.

In line with a community psychology approach (Orford, 1992) further research around female experiences of services could be explored, specifically exploring what works and what the barriers were to accessing support. This research could help inform the development of relevant and appropriate support and prevention services for women and girls.

Additionally, further research is required to explore the impact of the covid-19 pandemic on gang affiliation for females in the UK and the impact that lockdown has had on female's experiences of gang affiliation.

5.5 Chapter summary

In summary, the current study offers a detailed insight into the experiences and perceptions of five women who had previously been affiliated with gangs, whilst drawing upon psychological and sociological theory and research to help understand this phenomenon further.

Although the findings cannot be generalised to all females associated with gangs, this study highlights the experiences that may lead women and girls to become affiliated with gangs, alongside offering an insight into their relationships within the gang and how they achieved desistance from the gang. The current findings add to the limited evidence base in this field and offer implications on an individual, systemic and academic level.

6 Chapter 6: Conclusion

The current study aimed to add to the limited evidence base related to female affiliation in gangs in the UK and the current findings offer a gendered perspective on the experiences and perceptions of women and girls previously affiliated with gangs. While a small sample size of this study, the findings offer a rich and valuable insight into female's experiences of gang affiliation. These findings intended to increase the knowledge and understanding in this field in relation to the three research questions:

What are the perceptions of females formerly affiliated with gangs, of their experiences within gangs, in relation to:

1. *joining gangs?*
2. *relationships in gangs?*
3. *desisting from the gang?*

The current study adds to the research evidence around females in UK gangs to suggest that females may become affiliated with gangs if the gang was viewed a method of gaining affection and belonging, alongside a method of gaining an aspirational lifestyle. These desires were often connected to experienced challenging life/ home experiences and opportunities for gang affiliation in the community. This was interpreted as suggesting that gangs offer emotional, social and financial benefits for some women that can be perceived

as beneficial by young people and may be absent in other areas of their life or community. The current research extends previous studies, in suggesting for females' family and community factors such perceptions of parenting styles, community role models, sense of belonging and poverty may influence affiliation.

In relation to research question two women's experiences of relationships in gangs were mediated by their perceived gender characteristics and subsequently their roles in the gang. The current study supports previous evidence to suggest that often females demonstrating stereotypical feminine characteristics were deemed as lower status and having less power than males or females exhibiting stereotypical male characteristics and were more likely to be subjected to high levels of control, manipulation, and violence by males in the group. It was explicitly explored in this study, that adopting masculine characteristics were viewed by females as a protective factor against sexual assault. The current study supports previous research and poses implications around the need for education around consent and healthy relationships to be taught in schools to help combat patriarchal and sexist practices within gangs and wider society, and to help females to make well-informed choices before forming relationships. It is felt that further research exploring the role of sexism within gangs would be beneficial to aid this work.

In relation to leaving the gang, the current research adds to the limited evidence globally relating to why females leave gangs and uniquely offers insight into the experiences of females leaving gangs in the UK. Within this study, many of the females reflected that they wished to leave the gang often following a significant event, because this had led them to re-evaluate their lives and wish to create a new identity. However, many of the women suggested that it was challenging to leave the gang due to the culture of fear and violence that was explicit in the gang and that geographical relocation was necessary to ensure their safe desistence. It was explored that holistic support from external agencies would need to pro-socially supplement the social, emotional, and financial supports that had led to the women becoming involved in the gang initially. Further exploration around what this support has looked like for women across the diverse communities of the UK would be

beneficial to aid intervention and prevention support for females affiliated or at risk of gang affiliation.

Overall, this research highlights the interconnections between the impact of environmental, societal, and personal factors on the participants' affiliation with gangs, relationships, and desistance from gangs in relation to female affiliation within the UK. This research adds validity to models such as The Adjusted Unified Model of Gang membership (Mozova, 2017) and the Unified Model (Alleyne & Wood, 2010) which have previously focused on male affiliation, to suggest that gang affiliation in the female population is similarly influenced by a range of individual, family and systemic factors, and therefore interventions to reduce and prevent gang affiliation needs to occur across these levels. It is acknowledged that female experiences of gangs differ greatly to males, and therefore intervention and preventative work for females needs to be bespoke and informed by the voices of females across the country. This therefore highlights that further work and research is required in this area to ensure that the voices of females in gangs are heard and elevated to ensure that support is appropriate and beneficial to preventing affiliation and assisting desistance.

Appendices

Appendix A: Systematic search details

Date	12.07.2021
Timespan	1966 – Date
Search language	English
Databases	Web of Science
Search terms/results	Female AND gang AND UK (7 results, 5 excluded) Women AND gang AND UK (6 results, 5 excluded) Girls AND gang AND UK (2 results, 1 excluded)

Actions	<p>Exclusion criteria applied and references removed (principal reasons for exclusion: research conducted with a prison gang population, only included male participants.</p> <p>Remaining references saved to Zotero for screening</p>
---------	---

Date	13.07.2021
Timespan	Range, see below
Search language	English
Databases	PRO Quest (11 databases: APA Psych Articles 1984 – current, ASSIA 2000 -current, Criminal Justice database 1981 – current, education database 1988- current, Social Science database, Sociology database 1985-current, Dissertations and Theses A&I, Social sciences premium collection 1914-current incorporating 8 sub-databases)
Search terms/results	<p>Female AND gang AND UK (45,417 results)</p> <p>Female AND gang AND member* AND experience (refined for UK or England or Scotland or Wales or Ireland) (367 results)</p> <p>Female AND street gang AND member* AND experience (refined for UK or England or Scotland or Wales or Ireland) (212 results)</p> <p>Female AND street gang AND member* AND experience (refined for UK or England or Scotland or Wales or Ireland and by the topic of gang, women, girl) (42 results, 39 excluded)</p>
Actions	<p>Exclusion criteria applied and references removed (principal reasons for exclusion: Magazine article, Male only participants, prison population, not relevant to research question, perspectives of professionals, lack of rich qualitative data (using offending, crime, and justice service data)</p>

	Remaining references saved to Zotero for screening
--	--

Date	13.07.2021
Timespan	1967 – date
Search language	English
Databases	APA Psych INFO
Search terms/results	Female AND gang AND UK (2 results, 0 excluded) Women AND gang AND UK (0 results) Girls AND gang AND UK (0 results)
Actions	Remaining references saved to Zotero for screening

Date	14.07.2021
Timespan	1966 – date
Search language	English
Databases	Ethos
Search terms/results	Female AND gang (15 results, 11 excluded) Women AND gang (19 results, 15 excluded) Girls AND gang AND UK (13 results, 11 excluded)
Actions	Exclusion criteria applied and references removed (principal reasons for exclusion: Male only participants, not relevant to research question) Remaining references saved to Zotero for screening

Appendix B: Selection of studies excluded from final Systematic Literature review selection

Excluded study	Reason why
Hesketh, 2019	Male population only.
Vasquez, 2012	Quantitative data only.
Alleyne, 2010	Quantitative data only.
Auyong, 2018	Quantitative focus on historical data.

Appendix C: Qualitative Research Synthesis Themes Table

Third order interpretations						
<p>Connectedness/Relatedness</p> <p>Manipulation and control</p> <p>Disempowerment</p> <p>Victimisation</p> <p>Normalisation</p> <p>Community roles</p>						
Overarching themes						
	Relationships: complex and controlling	Female roles	Criminality: Accessories	Fear	Gang 'family'	Self and society
Second order themes						
	<p>-Peer Relationships</p> <p>-Sexual relationships</p> <p>-Attitudes towards sexual violence/exploitation</p> <p>-Geographical implications on relationships</p>	<p>-3 main Female roles:</p> <p>Defeminising</p> <p>Gangster girl,</p> <p>Sexualise female and homemaker</p>	<p>-Accessories to criminal acts</p> <p>-Being used to exploit other gangs</p> <p>-Carrying goods /concealing goods</p>	<p>-Normalised Domestic violence</p> <p>-Female on female violence</p> <p>-victimisation of family members</p>	<p>-Belonging</p> <p>-Acceptance</p> <p>-Creation of a new 'family'</p> <p>-Desire for recognition and status</p>	<p>-Financial need</p> <p>-Lack of alternatives to gang life</p> <p>-Lack of exit strategies/ clarity around support</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Manipulation by males -Attraction to exciting/dangerous life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Traditional female traits linked to roles -Recruiting other females 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Perceptions around victim Vs criminal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Fear of repercussions of disclosures 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Associated due to family affiliations
Study	First Order themes					
Firmin, 2010	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -sexual exploitation/ violence the female's fault -ignorance around relationship expectations - male infidelity - relationships restricted to males in local gang area -Females manipulated by males - impact of relationship status 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 3 female roles (sexual, criminal or homemaker) -dependant on skills and perceived femininity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Used as lookouts, carriers of weapons/drugs and store goods in their homes -Willing to protect a partner at any cost -excitement of criminality -viewed as criminals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Becoming desensitized to domestic violence - Violence against females to collect/repay a gang debt -Female on female violence - Fear of repercussions of police involvement - Domestic violence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Wanting to be accepted by the gang - pride in belonging -Females protected by the gang -Loyalty to the gang 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -always involved in crime - Family links to the gang -Unwilling to 'snitch' -tangible rewards (money, material goods) -lack of community services

				-witnessing extreme violence against families/ other gangs		
Becket et al, 2013	- relationships restricted to males in local gang area -sexual violence against females normalised - sexual exploitation/ violence the female's fault -Females manipulated by males - impact of relationship status	-females roles sexualised -Females being used as 'bait' for males in other gangs -gangster girls 'defeminised' -females objectified	-Willing to protect a partner at any cost - viewed as criminals	- Fear of extreme violence - Fear of repercussions of police involvement -female on female violence -sexual violence as a message to other gangs -family victimisation	-Need for protection from gang -Loyalty -Belonging to a new family	-Lack of alternative ways to live -lack of safe space to disclose information -family links to the gang -financial benefits of gang affiliation
XPL and the centre for	-Relationships viewed as exciting and dangerous	- females objectified	-Used as lookouts, carriers of weapons/drugs and	- Fear of repercussions of police /social	- status in gang -acceptance - belonging	-Lack of safe space to disclose information - Desistance: leaving area Lack of alternatives in area

social justice (2018)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Desistance mentoring from ex-gang members /motherhood -sexual violence against females normalised - sexual exploitation/ violence the female's fault 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - females recruiting other females - 3 female roles (sexual, criminal or homemaker) -dependant on skills and perceived femininity 	store goods in their homes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> services involvement - Family victimisation -domestic violence 		
Couper, 2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Females manipulated by males - sexual exploitation/ violence the female's fault - Desistance: motherhood -Relationships viewed as exciting and dangerous - gang treatment linked to relationship status and reputation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - selling drugs - Females objectified 	-Used as lookouts, carriers of weapons/drugs and store goods in their homes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fear of repercussions of police /social services involvement - Desistance: exposed to extreme violence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - protected by the gang -belonging 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -financial benefits of gang affiliation - lack of a way out - family links to the gang -lack of alternatives - financial need for gang affiliation

				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Becoming desensitized to domestic violence -female on female violence 		
Elliott, 2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Peer relationships - Females manipulated by males - sexual exploitation/ violence the female's fault -male infidelity normalised -desistance: motherhood/maturation - relationships restricted to males in local gang area 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Females objectified -judgemental labelling and treatment of sexually active females -gangster girls 'defeminised' -females recruiting other females 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Used as lookouts, carriers of weapons/drugs and store goods in their homes -Willing to protect a partner at any cost - Females gaining custodial sentence -selling drugs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -female on female violence -fear of extreme violence -traumatised -Domestic violence -Family victimisation - Fear of repercussions of police /social services involvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Belonging -Protected by gang -Loyalty -recognition - stability when lacking in family 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - tangible benefits of gang affiliation (money, material goods) -financial need to join gang -lack of alternatives

Walter, 1999	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Females manipulated by males - sexual exploitation/ violence the female's fault -Relationships viewed as exciting and dangerous -peer relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - selling drugs - Females objectified 	-selling drugs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - female on female violence -fear of extreme violence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Acceptance -protected by gang - stability when lacking in family -belonging 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Family links to the gang -lack of alternatives -lack of a way out -financial need to join gang
Choak, 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Females manipulated by males - impact of relationship status - peer relationships - relationships restricted to males in local gang area - sexual exploitation/ violence the female's fault -Relationships viewed as exciting and dangerous 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 3 female roles (sexual, criminal or homemaker) -gangster girls 'defeminised' -Females being used as 'bait' for males in other gangs - females recruiting other females 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -selling drugs -Used as lookouts, carriers of weapons/drugs and store goods in their homes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - female on female violence -fear of extreme violence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -recognition -acceptance -loyalty -protected by gang - stability when lacking in family 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Family links to the gang -lack of alternatives -lack of a way out -financial need to join gang - tangible benefits of gang affiliation (money, material goods)

Appendix D: Extracts from the researcher's reflexive journal

17.12.20

After meeting with PEP today, I have started to question what I will do if the participants disclose criminal actions during my interviews. How will I manage this in a way that safeguards all that are involved, doesn't breach confidentiality but remains ethical. I feel that I need to discuss this more in supervision looking at worse case scenarios to ensure that I have a procedure in place if these issues are raised.

6.9.21

After speaking with D who has previously researched in this area, I feel that I need to reach out to more agencies to gain participants. She made me consider the motivation of females to be part of my study i.e., what is in it for them. I am considering if I need to offer an incentive for involvement and how to form alliances with agencies to aid access to potential participants. Food for thought! Also, this might help my plan B if I cannot talk directly with females, I may have formed links with professionals who have supported women previously in gangs.

2.12.21

Today's interview was so interesting, and the participant shared many similarities in her background to me. It made me consider the protective and risk factors in both our lives that have led to our differing experiences. Today has made me realise the scope of gang affiliation and made me consider the preconceptions society have around what 'types' of people become involved in gangs and how this can influence the support services available in different areas. Really interesting considering the north, south borough divides in my LA and how the north is perceived to be 'rough' with high levels of crime, whereas the south is very affluent and a 'this doesn't happen around here' attitude despite gang affiliation being high across the whole borough. Are people blindsiding themselves to current societal issues due to prejudice around class?

Appendix E: Interview Schedule development

Initial draft before consultation with stakeholder:

Joining the gang:

Can you tell me about your experiences of becoming involved in gang activity?
How did your involvement in gang activity come about?
What did you know about the gang before you joined?
What were your relationships like with other people in the gang before you joined?
How did gang members know you?

Relationships in gangs:

How would you describe your role within the gang?
What role did other females have?
Was there anything that influenced your role?
How did you feel about your role?
How did other people know you were part of the gang?
How did it feel to be associated with a gang?
What were your relationships like with other people in the gang when you were a member?
What was your relationship like with men within the gang?
What was your relationship like with females?

Desistence from the gang:

What led you to no longer be involved with the gang?
What were the barriers to you leaving?
How did you feel about leaving?
What helped you to move out of being involved in gang activity?
What support were you offered to help you leave?
What support do you think helped you leave the gang and why did it help?
What other support would have been helpful in aiding you to leave the gang?

What support have you received to help you stay out of gang activity?
What support do you think helped you to stay out of gang activity and why did it help?
What other support would be helpful in supporting you to stay out of gang activity?

Broad questions

What did you find were some of the positive aspects of being involved in gang activity?
What did you find were some of the negative aspects of being involved in gang activity?
How have these experiences influenced your ideas about your future?
How have these experiences influenced how you see yourself or describe yourself?
How have these experiences changed you?

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

Final interview schedule:

Joining the gang:

Can you tell me about your experiences of becoming involved in gang activity?
How did your involvement in gang activity start?
How old were you when you became involved?
What did you know about the gang before you joined?
What were your relationships like with other people in the gang before you joined?
How did you know you were part of the gang?
How did you feel about being part of the gang?

Relationships in gangs:

How would you describe your role within the gang?
What role did other females have?
Was there anything that influenced your role in the gang?
How did you feel about your role?
How did other people know you were part of the gang?
What were your relationships like with other people in the gang once you were a member?
What was your relationship like with men within the gang?
What was your relationship like with females within the gang?
What was your relationship like with people not in the gang?
What was your relationship like with people in other gangs?

Desistence from the gang:

What led you to no longer be involved with the gang?
What stopped you from leaving straight away?
How did you feel about leaving?
What helped you to no longer involved in gang activity?
What support were you offered to help you leave?
What support do you think helped you leave the gang and why did it help?
What other support would have been helpful in aiding you to leave the gang?

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

Appendix F: Transcript extract from one participant

O: I was wondering about your parents, as you mentioned earlier that your parents are quite controlling and quite protective, and I'm wondering what their views were on your new relationship with C?

K: My parents are kind of oblivious to it all to be honest. When I was younger I only showed them what I wanted to, like I'd always be home on time, I'd always do my homework at school, I was never rude. I kind of had this persona of I'm a good girl and they never really clued onto kind of what was really going on.

When I left my ex-boyfriend, they had questions about it but I just sort of said that we were over and they were fine with that. And then when I started dating C, my parents just seemed happy for me. They could see kind of like happy I was and now I had my car I was really independent. Their main concern really was my A-levels and if I was happy. I looked happy and I was doing well in my A-levels, so that was enough for them.

I was like model student and because there was no sort of outwards bad behaviour anything I think I kind of slipped under everyone's radar really because my parents and my teachers only knew what I showed them.

I think the only really became like aware of stuff when my mental health kind of started to decline, so things were going great with C and I was doing lots of pick-ups, drops offs and stuff for the gang. But then C started to change a bit and I think my parents knew things were changing but we never really talked about that sort of stuff anyway in my house, so I wasn't going to start talking about it with them now.

O: What started changing?

K: C's cousin had become kind of a big deal, big time drug dealer at this point. He would throw these huge class A parties and stuff like that. Big flashy watches, fast cars, everything. C wanted in on that life and used to go to the parties. Then his coke habit started, and he was always on it. He was so full of life, not sleeping, raving all the time. But then he would become paranoid about me seeing other men and get all in my face. I got on well with his cousin and started going to the parties too. Taking coke, dancing around with everyone, drinking all the time. I felt great. A-levels during the day, parties at night, everyone loved me and wanted to get to know me. I finally felt like I'd made it.

Then I don't know a relationship kind of change so at this point I was maybe 18. I had a weekend job at the local the local shop, just a little co-op down the road. So I had a bit of my money so I was able to buy things. Didn't really need to as C and his cousin got everything, but then they started demanding money off me to like pay my way. For the drugs and that.

I was already doing delivery's and stuff, and they had all my money for the drugs but it still wasn't enough. C would get aggressive and say that I was sponging off him, and if I loved him I wouldn't take advantage of him like that.








I noticed kind of the dark side of Craig coming out more when he'd see me get attention from other guys. He would absolutely hate that and that would turn him into just a bit of a nasty piece of work. He'd be telling me that I'm fat, ugly and crazy and worthless. Just kind of emotional abuse.

I think a lot of that came from him always being on coke and other drugs, but also didn't help because I was on the drug as well which made me quite vulnerable I think. That's when the physical abuse started so he'd like to throw things at me, hit me and stuff. At this point he had his own place and most of the time I stayed at his, just going home for clothes really. I

Appendix G: Reflective Thematic Analysis Process

Phase 1 of Reflective thematic analysis

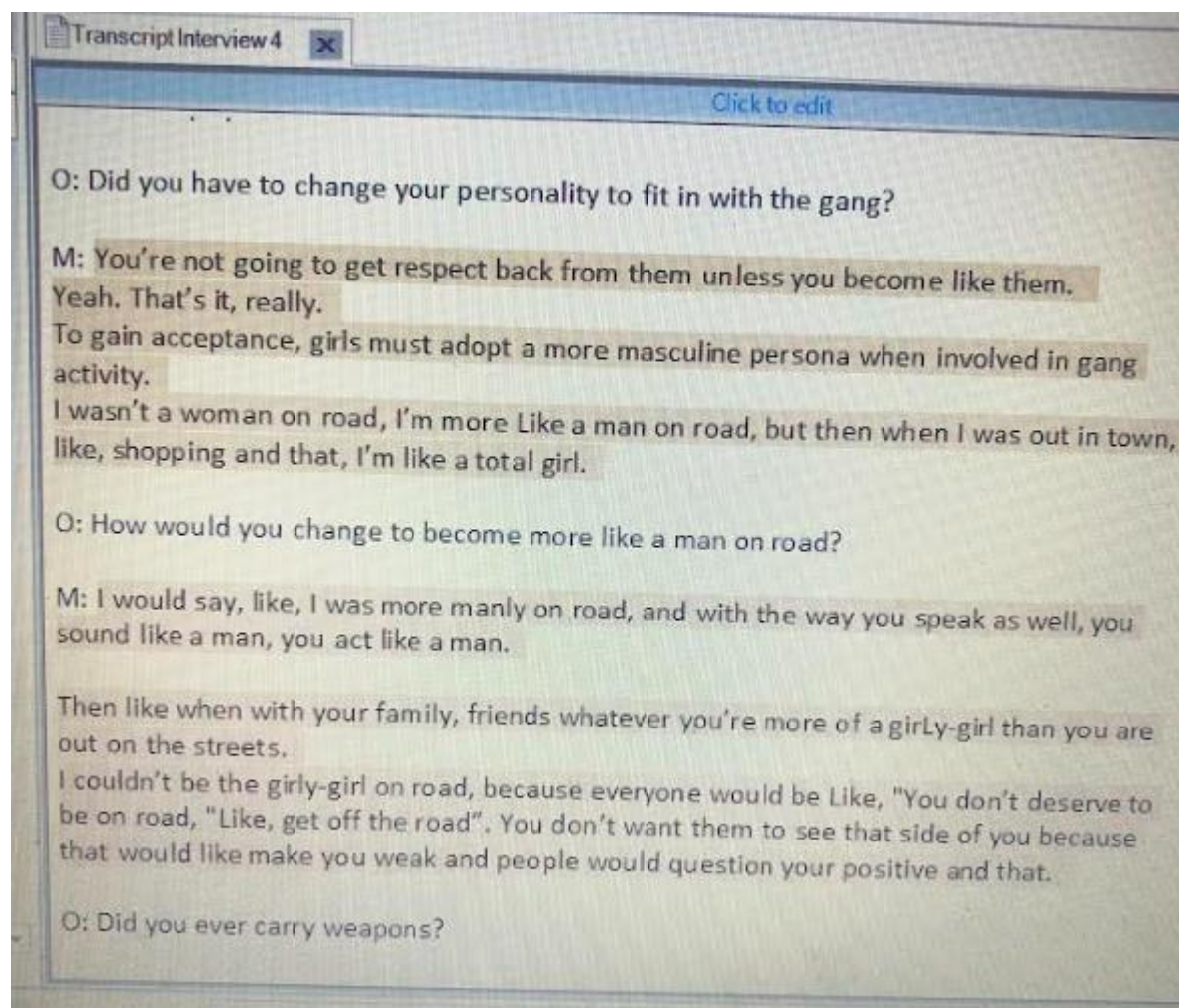
The image below outlines some initial reflections when becoming familiar with the transcripts prior to coding on NVivo. At this stage in the analysis process, initial reflections were used to aid familiarisation and did not reflect any coding of the dataset.

<i>M: Well I grew up in poverty and round our ends there weren't a lot to do really. There was a group of young people on our estate. Lots of people like between 13 and 25, I don't know. The crew in the gang would park their cars up by the estate and like chill by the park. They were always laughing and joking. You just wanted to be part of that life.</i>	 Lowe, Olivia (Childrens Services and Skills Dire SES and lack of opportunities
<i>Everything was so dull everywhere else and then there was them, life and soul and that.</i>	 Lowe, Olivia (Childrens Services and Skills Dire Dominated by young people
<i>O: How did you become involved with them?</i>	 Lowe, Olivia (Childrens Services and Skills Dire Wealth
<i>M: I used to like mill about by them and then they befriended me, they let me stand by them.</i>	 Lowe, Olivia (Childrens Services and Skills Dire Visible enjoyment
<i>There was a girl. I was 11 or 12, she was about 16. She was so beautiful.</i>	 Lowe, Olivia (Childrens Services and Skills Dire Gradual affiliation – hang round, become friends, affiliated
<i>When the others were maybe taking the mickey out of me or saying things about my clothes, she would be like, stop it, so she was always very kind.</i>	 Lowe, Olivia (Childrens Services and Skills Dire Poverty?
	 Lowe, Olivia (Childrens Services and Skills Dire Affection shown by aspirational peers

Coding (Phase 2 of Reflective thematic analysis)

Example of using Nvivo to generate codes from each transcript

This image demonstrates how codes were generated from each transcript using NVivo software. The transcripts were uploaded on to Nvivo and then sections of the text were highlighted and coded by the researcher. A list of codes were then generated for each transcript.



Item

Explore

Code

Code

Classification

Classification

List View

Find

Workspace

Files

Search Project

Name

Codes

References

Transcript 1	78	136
Transcript Interview 2	47	63
Transcript Interview 3	62	72
Transcript Interview 4	38	43
Transcript Interview 5	40	43

Transcript 1

O: That's really interesting how have you left one toxic relationship and joined another one that you've perceived at the time to be really positive and really loving, even nurturing. I'm wondering about how you became involved in gang activity, how are you drawn in because it sounds like at that moment in in your story you're in a relationship with him, you're very aware that he's in a gang but as of yet there is not any sort of gang activity your involved in?

K: Yeah so at the time I was 16, it was lovely and kind for the first maybe 6 or 7 months. It was great, C used to buy me presents, he was in quite a lot of money from like his drug dealing. We'd eat out, go to the cinema like it was just really romantic.

Then when I was 17, I learnt how to drive and then because my parents were quite well off they bought me a car. That's when I kind of noticed things kind of change slightly. We we're still very much like in love and everything was amazing, but that's when I noticed he would ask me for like lifts to shady places.

Because I was able to drive, I sort of had a job in the gang then. I would be asked to take like him and his friends here and wait in the car, it felt like I was like a getaway driver. I don't want to I say was ignorant but like I didn't want to know what was going on, so I never asked any questions, I just drove where they said to. Whatever they wanted doing, I would do it.

He would also ask me to hold stuff for him. So I hid his things under my bed and I think looking back I think I was hiding weapons, drugs, money and that that sort of stuff.

I just did what I was told to do.

O: That's really interesting it sounds like kind of the reason you became more involved in

In

Notes

Code At

Ctrl + Q

X

Main codes generated across transcripts:

This table demonstrates the codes generated across the 5 transcripts. Some of the codes have been clustered at this stage due to similarities in phrasing and semantics such as “destroying evidence for the gang” and “disposing of weapons”.

Lack of belonging with peers.	Lack of alternative methods of making money in the community.	Gang members being viewed as role models by young people.	The gang meeting young peoples basic needs (food, shelter, protection)	High level of parental control leading to risk taking behaviour (drugs, crime).	Stereotypical female characteristics linked to less respected roles in the gang (hiding and transporting goods)	Female sexuality used to entrap males for theft.	Domestic abuse and sexual assault normalised in intimate relationships.	Controlling relationships with males in the gang.	Protecting female friends in the gang
The gang offering a sense of belonging	Intimate relationships with gang members	Gang affiliation offering tangible,	Gang life' being viewed as thrilling.	Lack of parental presence due to	Female sexuality used to entrap	Female desire to not be objectified.	Emotional abuse by intimate	Females forming friendships with females	Stereotypical male characteristics (fighting)

to a family type unit.	being perceived as love.	aspirational rewards (goods, drugs, money, weapons).		economic factors, mental health.	males from other gangs.		partners in the gang.	with similar roles in the gang.	linked to perceived respect and power in the gang.
Lack of belonging to a school community e.g. changes in placement, exclusions.	Desire to gain positive attention and affection.	Lack of belonging or safety in family home.	The gang being a visible presence in the community.	Aggressive females used to threaten and attack females from other gangs in retribution, and ensure compliance from	Females with stereotypical male characteristics used in criminal activity.	Adopting a male persona to gain respect from males.	Sex being used as a method of male initiation into the gang.	Sexual promiscuity linked with a lack of male respect.	Sexual assault by males in the gang normalised.

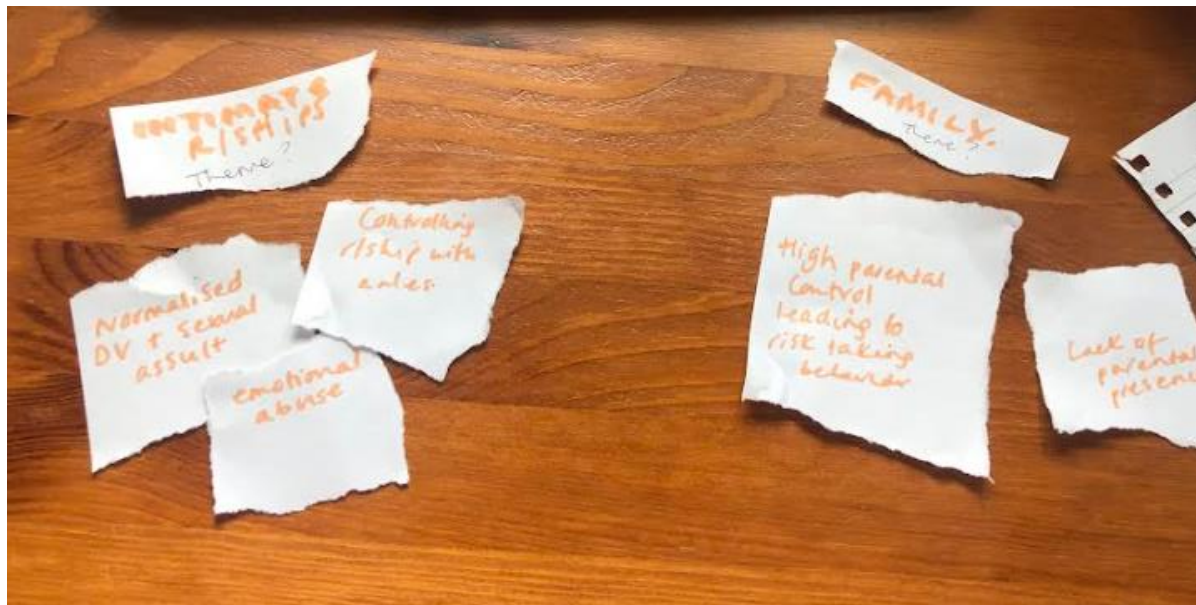
				females in the gang.					
Sexual assault being viewed typically as the females fault.	Females recruiting other females for sexual roles to avoid victimisation themselves	Professionals offering a nurturing, safe environment.	Family offering support away from gang affiliation.	Entering the care system.	Going to prison leading to a 'blank slate'.	Moving across the country to leaving the gang.	Friends in the gang being sent to prison.	Pregnancy causing a change in identity and future aspirations.	Hospitalisation leading to change in future aspirations.
Feeling a sense of duty to the gang.	Lack of a way out of the gang.	Controlled by the gang to undertake acts against their will.	Death or prosecution the only ways out of gang life.	Being viewed as a "good girl" enabling gang affiliation	Lack of professional curiosity around females affiliated with gangs.	Distrust of professionals leading to silence.	Lack of education around drug use, what healthy relationships	Sexual violence and drug use normalised.	Fear used as a mechanism for control and compliance.

				as under the radar of adults.			should look like.		
Fear of families being harmed.	Shame of actions linked to gang affiliation.	Lack of personal autonomy to make decisions around joining, leaving.							

Example of the process from phase 2 to 3, with initial codes being clustered to form draft themes around a research question:

The initial codes outlined in the table above were written out and clustered by hand initially, then formalised on the computer.

Grouping codes by hand:



Then grouping codes more formally using powerpoint to link evidence, codes and themes:

Research question 1:

What are the perceptions of females formally affiliated with gangs, of their experiences within gangs, in relation to their perceptions and experiences of **joining gangs**?

Draft theme: ←	Codes ←	Key Evidence
Gang affiliation enhancing feelings of belonging and affection that may be absent elsewhere their life.	Lack of belonging with peers. The gang offering a sense of belonging to a family type unit. Lack of belonging or safety in family home. Lack of belonging to a school community e.g. changes in placement, exclusions. Desire to gain positive attention and affection. Intimate relationships with gang members being perceived as love.	"I told her my estate and she said people like you aren't welcome in our house" (5) "taking coke, dancing with everyone... it felt great.. Everyone loved me and wanted to get to know me. It finally felt like I'd made it". (1) "He protected me and he made me feel safe, and that was just what I needed at the moment" (1) "He said that I was beautiful...Your hearing all of these things you want to hear, you get so lost in that world that you are not realising what is actually happening and what you are getting yourself into" (1) "They are your family, they look out for you so you look out for them. You know if you say no, then you're an outcast again" (3) "I kind of belonged and they liked me and I liked them". (1) "loads of kids who would like hang around. It was where you went if you wanted to be with the in crowd" (2) "I felt really lonely and then as soon as someone gave me an olive branch I went with it." (1) "I was looking for genuinely loving relationships and was desperate for love and care" (2) "they show that they like you and then you like them. They ask you, can my friend come?... Can you hold this for me please?" (4) "the girls will do a lot of bad stuff for them just because they are in love with them" (2) "they respect you and make you feel cherished and important... it's everything in one. This was our family." (4) "if you don't have that support for girls like me, they will get that love and stuff from the wrong people and that's hard to get out of then." (2)

Generating initial themes (Phase 3 of Reflective thematic analysis)

Research question focus	Potential Themes
Research question 1: perceptions and experiences of <u>joining</u> gangs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gang affiliation enhancing feelings of belonging and affection that may be absent elsewhere in their life. • Gang affiliation offering an aspirational life style, that cannot be achieved by other means. • Family circumstances leading to gang affiliation.
Research question 2: perceptions and experiences of <u>relationships</u> in gangs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stereotypical female characteristics linked with subordinate roles in the gang. • Intimate relationships with gang members are conflicted and controlling. • Camaraderie amongst females with similar roles in the gang. • Females' adopting stereotypical male characteristics to enhance respect and power in the gang. • Sexual acts being used to threaten female compliance and enhance male status.
Research question 3: perceptions and experiences of <u>desisting</u> from the gang	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional involvement leading to desistance. • Leaving the gang means leaving the area. • "Wake up calls" to re-evaluate identity and aspirations.
Recurrent themes linking to all three research questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Females feeling indebted and controlled by the gang. • Females falling through the gaps of professionals. • Naiveties of "true" gang affiliation.

Developing and reviewing Themes (Phase 4 of Reflective thematic analysis)

Research question focus	Developing themes
Research question 1: perceptions and experiences of <u>joining</u> gangs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Challenging home/life experiences.• Seeking belonging and love.• Aspirational lifestyle
Research question 2: perceptions and experiences of <u>relationships</u> in gangs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Gender and power.• Control and power.• Roles and camaraderie.
Research question 3: perceptions and experiences of <u>desisting</u> from the gang	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Professional support.• Leaving the area.• Redefining identity.
Recurrent themes linking to all three research questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fear.• The power of professionals.• Identity.• Naivety

Refining, defining, and naming themes (Phase 5 of Reflective thematic analysis)

Theme focus	Superordinate theme	Subordinate themes
Perceptions and experiences of <u>joining</u> gangs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenging home/life experiences. • Seeking belonging and love. • Aspirational lifestyle 	
Perceptions and experiences of <u>relationships</u> in gangs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender and power. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stereotypical female characteristics being linked to reduced power and status • Sexual violence used to coerce and control. • Female adopting stereotypical male characteristics to elevate status and power
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Male manipulation and control • Female camaraderie and gang roles 	
Perceptions and experiences of <u>desisting</u> from the gang	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • External support to leave • Leaving the area. • Re-evaluating and re-defining identity. 	
Recurrent themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A culture of fear and violence • The power of professionals. • Youth naivety around gang relationships 	

Appendix H: Ethical approval from the University of Nottingham



School of Psychology

The University of Nottingham
University Park
Nottingham
NG7 2RD

tel: +44 (0)115 846 7403 or (0)115 951 4344

Friday 8th October 2021

Ref: **S1366**

Dear Russell Hounslow and Olivia Atherton

Title of the new project: An exploration of influences in female gang membership in the UK (as original submission)

Applicants: Olivia Atherton

Details of the previous study:

Applicant: Olivia Atherton

Title of the Previous study: An exploration of influences in female gang membership in the UK

Date of approval: 6 July 2021

Reference number (if known): S1334

As Chair of the Ethics Committee I have considered your request and I am happy to grant approval for the following changes:

Increasing age range from 18- 25 years old to 18 – 30 years old. No additional ethical issues are foreseen because of this change. 2. Amended participant recruitment methods to include recruitment via HM Prison & Probation Service in addition to community groups. As a result, participants will be those known to HMPPS and in prison custody. Additional ethical risks in recruiting incarcerated participants are identified as: a) additional challenges in preserving participant anonymity during data collection; b) the availability of support for participants after involvement in the study; and c) opportunities to withdraw from the study. All other design features remain unchanged. Where participants are recruited via HMPPS and currently in prison, the following additional actions will be taken to mitigate ethical risks:

- Interviews will be arranged to take place in prison locations that protect participants' confidentiality and anonymity (e.g. interview rooms, offices). This will be arranged and agreed with the point of contact for each establishment prior to the interview being conducted. - The researcher will work with a named officer in relevant institutions to identify appropriate channels of support for participants before commencing data collection. Participants will be provided with information about sources of emotional support and how to access them via debrief information on completion of the interviews. Support for participants is likely to include services such as the Listeners, prison-based psychologists, and telephone number to Samaritans. They will also be advised that they can seek support via their Personal Officer in their institution. - Participants will continue to hold the right to withdraw from the study at any

time and for any reason, up to the point of data transcription. The study information sheet and debrief materials will be updated to inform participants to contact the researcher with this request or, where the prison regime means this is not possible, to request that their personal officer does so on their behalf.

Final responsibility for ethical conduct of your research rests with you or your supervisor. The Codes of Practice setting out these responsibilities have been published by the British Psychological Society and the University Research Ethics Committee. If you have any concerns whatever during the conduct of your research then you should consult those Codes of Practice.

Independently of the Ethics Committee procedures, supervisors also have responsibilities for the risk assessment of projects as detailed in the safety pages of the University web site. Ethics Committee approval does not alter, replace, or remove those responsibilities, nor does it certify that they have been met.

Yours sincerely



*Professor Stephen Jackson
Chair, Ethics Committee*

Please note the name change from Olivia Atherton to Olivia Lowe following marriage in July 2021.

Appendix I: Consent form

School of Psychology

Title of Project: An exploration of influences in female affiliation in the UK

Ethics Approval Number: S1334R



Researcher(s): Olivia Lowe

Supervisor(s): Russell Hounslow

The participant should answer these questions independently:

- Have you read and understood the Information Sheet?
Yes. No
- Have you had the opportunity to ask questions about the study?
Yes. No
- Have all your questions been answered satisfactorily?
Yes. No
- Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from the study? (at any time and without giving a reason up until the point of transcription, approximately 2 weeks after the interview).
Yes No
- I give permission for my data from this study to be shared with other researchers provided that their anonymity is completely protected¹.
Yes No
- Do you agree to take part in the study?
Yes No

¹ All the information gathered will be confidential, this will only be broken if:

- you report an intention to harm themselves or others,
- you report an intention to break prison security rules,
- you disclose unreported offences.
- You disclose information concerned with terrorist, radicalisation or security issues.

"This study has been explained to me to my satisfaction, and I agree for to take part. I understand that I am/they are free to withdraw at any time."

Signature of the Participant:

Date:

Name of participant (in block capitals):

I have explained the study to the above participant, and she has agreed to take part.

Signature of researcher:

Date:

Appendix J: Information sheet

Title of Project: An exploration of influences in female affiliation in the UK

Ethics Approval Number: S1334R

I am researching the experiences of females who have previously been associated with gang activity.

The research hopes to understand female experiences in gangs better, and to help inform support services that help females as currently there's little research on females associated with gangs in the UK. I hope that through this research I can help change this.

I am contacting you to ask if you would like to take part in this research.

If you chose to take part, it will involve being interviewed by me, Olivia, for between 1 hour and 1 hour and 30 minutes. You would be asked questions about your experiences before, during and after gang involvement. You would not have to answer any questions you did not want to and can leave the study at any point without giving a reason, or any negative consequences.

With your permission I will be on recording the interview. Only the audio will be recorded, and all the information gathered will be stored securely.

All the information gathered will be stored securely and used for research purposes and to advise support services.

No names will be used in the data: you (or others) could not be identified. Any reports will be anonymous, meaning no one will be able to identify you in the research or guidance provided to community support groups.

All the information gathered will be confidential, this will only be broken if:

- you report an intention to harm themselves or others,
- you report an intention to break prison security rules,
- you disclose unreported offences.

If you agree to take part it is completely voluntary and you can withdraw at any stage without giving a reason up until the point of transcription, approximately 2 weeks after the interview.

Thankyou,

Olivia Lowe
Researcher

References

- Alleyne, E., & Pritchard, E. (2016). Psychological and behavioral characteristics differentiating gang and non-gang girls in the UK. *Journal of Criminological Research, Policy and Practice*, 2(2), 122–133. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCRPP-05-2015-0017>
- Alleyne, E., & Wood, J. L. (2010). Gang involvement: Psychological and behavioral characteristics of gang members, peripheral youth, and nongang Youth. *Aggressive Behavior*, 36(6), 423–436. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ab.20360>
- Alleyne, E., & Wood, J. L. (2012). Gang Membership: The Psychological Evidence. In F.-A. Esbensen & C. L. Maxson (Eds.), *Youth Gangs in International Perspective* (pp. 151–168). Springer New York. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-1659-3_9
- Atkinson, R. (1998). *The life story interview*. SAGE Publications.
- Auyong, Z. E. G., Smith, S., & Ferguson, C. J. (2018). Girls in Gangs: Exploring Risk in a British Youth Context. *Crime & Delinquency*, 64(13), 1698–1717. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011128718763130>
- Beckett, H., Brodie, I., Factor, F., Melrose, M., Pearce, J., Pitts, J., & Warrington, C. (2013). ‘It’s wrong-but you get used to it’: A qualitative study of gang-associated sexual violence towards, and exploitation of, young people in England. *University of Bedfordshire*.
- Bennett, T., & Holloway, K. (2004). *GANG MEMBERSHIP, DRUGS AND CRIME IN THE UK*. 19.
- Bjerregaard, B. (2002). Self-definitions of Gang Membership and Involvement in Delinquent Activities. *Youth & Society*, 34(1), 31–54. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X02034001002>

- Boyatzid, R. E. (1998). *Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development*. Sage.
- Bradford, B., Jackson, J., & Hough, M. (2013). *Police Futures and Legitimacy*.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1992). *Ecological systems theory*.
- Brotherton, D., C. (2015). *Youth street gangs: A critical appraisal*. Routledge.
- Campbell, A. (1984). Girls' talk: The social representation of aggression by female gang members. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 11(2), 139–156.
- Campbell, A. (1990). Female participation in gangs. *Gangs in America*.
- Campbell, A. (1991). On the invisibility of the female delinquent peer group. *Women & Criminal Justice*, 2(1), 41–62.
- Carrington, K. (2013). Girls and Violence: The Case for a Feminist Theory of Female Violence. *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, 2(2), 63–79. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ijcjsd.v2i2.101>
- Chidley, S., & Stringer, P. (2020). Addressing barriers to implementation: An Implementation Framework to help educational psychologists plan work with schools. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 36(4), 443–457. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02667363.2020.1838448>
- Choak, C. (2018). *YOUNG WOMEN ON ROAD: FEMININITIES, RACE AND GANGS IN LONDON* [Doctoral dissertation]. University of East London.
- Couper, R. (2016). *HOW DO FEMALES MAKE SENSE OF THEIR EXPERIENCES OF BEING INVOLVED IN GANG ACTIVITY?* University of East London.

- Creswell, J., W. (2007). Five qualitative approaches to inquiry. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, 2, 53–80.
- Creswell, J., W., & Miller, D., L. (2000). Determining validity in qualitative inquiry. *THEORY INTO PRACTICE*, 39(3), 124–130.
- Decker, S. H., Melde, C., & Pyrooz, D. C. (2013). What Do We Know About Gangs and Gang Members and Where Do We Go From Here? *Justice Quarterly*, 30(3), 369–402.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07418825.2012.732101>
- Densley, J. A. (2012). The organisation of London's street gangs. *Global Crime*, 13(1), 42–64.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17440572.2011.632497>
- Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). (2008). *Gangs and group offending: Guidance for schools*.
- Elliot, J. (2005). Interpreting people's stories: Narrative approaches to the analysis of qualitative data. *Using Narrative in Social Research: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, 36-59.
- Elliott, S. (2012). *Situating females in UK gangs: An exploratory study* [Doctoral dissertation]. University of Glamorgan.
- Esbensen, F.-A., Deschenes, E. P., & Winfree, L. T. (1999). Differences between Gang Girls and Gang Boys: Results from a Multisite Survey. *Youth & Society*, 31(1), 27–53.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X99031001002>
- Esbensen, F.-A., Winfree, L. T., He, N., & Taylor, T. J. (2001). Youth Gangs and Definitional Issues: When is a Gang a Gang, and Why Does it Matter? *Crime & Delinquency*, 47(1), 105–130. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011128701047001005>
- Eshalomi, F. (2020). Gang associated Girls: Supporting young women at risk. *London Assembly Labour*.

- Fernández-Planells, A., Feixa, C., Sánchez-García, J., & Oliver, M. (2020). Researching Transnational Gangs as Agents of Mediation in the Digital Era. In *Gangs in the Era of Internet and Social Media*.
- Firmin, C. (2010). Female voice in violence project: A study into the impact of serious youth and gang violence on women and girls. *Race on the Agenda*.
- Fleisher, M. S., & Krienert, J. L. (2004). Life-course events, social networks, and the emergence of violence among female gang members. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 32(5), 607–622. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.20022>
- Frisby-Osman, S. (2019). *Gang members or vulnerable youth? Reshaping how we think of gang-involved youth: An examination into their emotional and mental health needs*. University of Kent.
- Glover Williams, A., & Finlay, F. (2019). County lines: How gang crime is affecting our young people. *Archives of Disease in Childhood*, 104(8), 730–732. <https://doi.org/10.1136/archdischild-2018-315909>
- Golafshani, N. (2003). *Understanding reliability and validity in qualitative research. The qualitative report*. 8(4), 597–606.
- Gough, D. (2007). Weight of evidence: A framework for the appraisal of the quality and relevance of evidence. *Research Papers in Education*, 22(2), 213–228.
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). *Competing paradigms in qualitative research. Handbook of qualitative research*. (Vol. 2).
- Harding, S. (2014). The street casino. Bristol, UK. *Policy Press*.
- Harris, M. G. (1988). *Cholas: Latino girls and gangs*. AMS Press.
- Hechter, M., & Kanazawa, S. (1997). Sociological rational choice theory. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 23(1), 191–214.

- Hirschi, T. (1969). Hirschi, T. (1969). Causes of delinquency. Berkeley: University of California Press. *University of California Press*.
- Hoang, H. (2007). Designing gender-specific programming: Gang reduction strategies for females. *Women's Policy Journal*, 4, 31–37.
- Jansen, H. (2010). The logic of qualitative survey research and its position in the field of social research methods. *Qualitative Social Research*, 11.2.
- Josselson, R. (2011). 'Bet you think this song is about you': Whose Narrative Is It in Narrative Research? *Narrative Matters*, 1(1), 33–51.
- Kelly, A., & Steeves, D. V. (2015). *Girls in Gangs: Listening to and Making Sense of Females' Perspectives of Gang Life*. 149.
- Kintrea, K. (2008). *Young people and territoriality in British cities*. 70.
- Klein, M. W. (2001). *Resolving the Eurogang paradox*. Springer.
- Klein, M. W., Weerman, F. M., & Thornberry, T. P. (2006). Street Gang Violence in Europe. *European Journal of Criminology*, 3(4), 413–437.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1477370806067911>
- Knowsley Safeguarding Children's Board. (2017). *Preventing and tackling the criminal exploitation of children*.
http://knowsleyscb.proceduresonline.com/chapters/p_prev_tack_crim_exploit.html#def_ch_crim
- Laidler, K. J., & Hunt, G. (2001). ACCOMPLISHING FEMININITY AMONG THE GIRLS IN THE GANG. *British Journal of Criminology*, 41(4), 656–678.
- Laub, J. H., & Sampson, R. J. (2001). Understanding desistance from crime. *Crime and Justice*, 28, 1–69.

- Lavrakas, P. J. (2008). *Lavrakas, P. J. (2008). Encyclopedia of survey research methods. Sage publications. Sage Publications.*
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry* (Vol. 75). Sage.
- Longfield, A. (2019). Gangs and knife crime: A national emergency. *British Journal of School Nursing, 14*(3), 139–140.
- Madhill, A., Jordan, A., & Shirley, C. (2000). Objectivity and reliability in qualitative analysis: Realist, contextualist and radical constructionist epistemologies. *British Journal of Psychology, 91*(1), 1–20.
- McAdams, D., P. (1993). *The stories we live by: Personal myths and the making of the self.* Guilford Press.
- Melde, C. (2016). Gangs and Gang Crime. In B. M. Huebner & T. S. Bynum (Eds.), *The Handbook of Measurement Issues in Criminology and Criminal Justice* (pp. 157–180). John Wiley & Sons, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118868799.ch8>
- Mertens, D., M. (2010). *Research and Evaluation in Education and Psychology, the Literature Review.* SAGE Publications.
- Mertens, D. M. (2010). Transformative Mixed Methods Research. *Qualitative Inquiry, 16*(6), 469–474. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410364612>
- Mertens, D., M. (2014). *Research and evaluation in education and psychology: Integrating diversity with quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods.* SAGE Publications.
- Metropolitan Police Service. (2020). A summary of the latest data relating to the MPS Gang Violence Matrix as of 31/12/2019. *MPS Gang Violence Matrix (GVM) Quarterly Figures.*
- Miller, J. (2001). *Young women's involvement in gangs in the United States: An overview.* Springer.

- Miller, J., & Decker, S. H. (2001). Young women and gang violence: Gender, street offending, and violent victimization in gangs. *Justice Quarterly*, 18(1), 115–140.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07418820100094841>
- Moore, J. (1991). *Going down to the barrio: Homeboys and homegirls in change*. Temple University Press.
- Mozova, K. (2017). *Ties in Gangs: Exploration of Perceived Group Processes in Gang Membership*. University of Kent.
- Murray, M. (2015). *Narrative Psychology*. Sage.
- Naples, N., Gurr, B., & Hesse-Biber, S. N. (2014). *Feminist research practice: A primer*.
- National Crime Agency. (2016). *County Lines Gang Violence, exploitation and drug supply 2016*. Drug Threat Team, Organised Crime Command.
- National Crime Agency. (2019). *County lines drug supply, vulnerability and harm 2018*.
- Newbury, A., Barton, E., Snowdon, L., & Hopkins, J. (2020). Understanding the impact of COVID-19 on violence and ACEs experienced by children and young people in Wales. *Violence Prevention Unit*.
- Noblit, G., & Hare, R. (1988). *Meta-ethnography: Synthesizing qualitative studies*. (Vol. 11). Sage.
- Nyumba, O., Wilson, T., Derrick, C. J., & Mukherjee, N. (2018). The use of focus group discussion methodology: Insights from two decades of application in conservation. *Methods in Ecology and Evolution*, 9(1), 20–32.
- Oppenheim, A., N. (1998). *Questionnaire Design, Interviewing and Attitude Measurement*. *Continuum- 3PL*.
- Orford, J. (1992). *Community psychology: Theory and practice*. John Wiley & Sons.

- Pepin, S. (2018). *County lines exploitation in London. Commons Debate Packs*.
<https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CDP2018-0009>
- Pitts, J. (2006). *Reluctant Gangsters: Youth Gangs in Waltham Forest*. 107.
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (1995). Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis. *International Journal for Qualitative Studies in Education.*, 8(1), 5–23.
- Pyrooz, D. C., & Decker, S. H. (2011). Motives and methods for leaving the gang: Understanding the process of gang desistance. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 39(5), 417–425.
- Quicker, J. C. (1983). Homegirls: Characterizing chicana gangs. *International Universities Press*.
- Reissman, C., K. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. Sage.
- Sanders, W. B. (1994). *Gangbangs and drive-bys: Grounded culture and juvenile gang violence*. Transaction Publishers.
- Savin-Baden, M. (Ed.). (2010). *New approaches to qualitative research: Wisdom and uncertainty*. Routledge.
- Savin-Baden, M., & Major, C. H. (2007). Using interpretative meta-ethnography to explore the relationship between innovative approaches to learning and their influence on faculty understanding of teaching. *Higher Education*, 54(6), 833–852.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-006-9035-3>
- Schwandt, T. A. (1994). *Constructionist, interpretivist approaches to human inquiry*. 45.
- Sharp, C., Aldridge, J., & Medina, J. (2006). *Delinquent youth groups and offending behaviour: Findings from the 2004 offending, crime and justice survey: (635312007-001)* [Data set]. American Psychological Association.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/e635312007-001>

- Singh, S., Roy, D., Sinha, K., Parveen, S., Sharma, G., & Joshi, G. (2020). Impact of COVID-19 and lockdown on mental health of children and adolescents: A narrative review with recommendations. *Psychiatry Research*, 293, 113429.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2020.113429>
- Slavin, R., & Smith, D. (2009). The relationship between sample sizes and effect sizes in systematic reviews in education. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 31(4), 500–506.
- Smithson, H., Christmann, K., Armitage, R., Monchuk, L., Whitehead, A., & Rogerson, M. (2009). *Young people's involvement in gangs and guns in Liverpool*.
- Southgate, J. (2011). *Seeing differently: Working with girls affected by gangs*. 57.
- Stone, N. (2018). Child Criminal Exploitation: 'County Lines', Trafficking and Cuckooing. *Youth Justice*, 18(3), 285–293. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473225418810833>
- Tebes, J. K. (2005). Community science, philosophy of science, and the practice of research. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 35(3), 213–230.
- The Centre for Social Justice, & XLP. (2013). *Girls and Gangs*.
- Thornberry, T. P., Krohn, M. D., Lizotte, A. J., Smith, C. A., & Tobin, K. (2002). *Gangs and Delinquency in Developmental Perspective* (1st ed.). Cambridge University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511499517>
- Thrasher, F., M. (1927). *The Gang: A Study of 1,313 Gangs in Chicago*. Chicago University.
- Vigil, J., D. (1988). Group processes and street identity: Adolescent Chicano gang members. *Ethos*, 16(4), 421–445.
- Walter, I. (1999). *Transgressing gender?: A study of girls in gangs* [Doctoral dissertation]. South Bank University.

- Ward, N. (2012). Complicating actions and complicated lives: Raising questions about narrative theory through an exploration of lesbian lives. *Biography and Turning Points in Europe and America*, 187.
- Warner, L. R., Settles, I. H., & Shields, S. A. (2016). Invited Reflection: Intersectionality as an Epistemological Challenge to Psychology. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 40(2), 171–176. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684316641384>
- Weerman, F. M., Bernasco, W., Bruinsma, G. J. N., & Pauwels, L. J. R. (2015). When Is Spending Time With Peers Related to Delinquency? The Importance of Where, What, and With Whom. *Crime & Delinquency*, 61(10), 1386–1413. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011128713478129>
- Weerman, F. M., Lovegrove, P. J., & Thornberry, T. (2015). Gang membership transitions and its consequences: Exploring changes related to joining and leaving gangs in two countries. *European Journal of Criminology*, 12(1), 70–91. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477370814539070>
- Weerman, F. M., Maxson, C. L., Esbensen, F.-A., Aldridge, J., Medina, J., & van Gemert, F. (2009). *EUROGANG PROGRAM MANUAL*. 38.
- Willig, C. (2001). *Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology: Adventures in Theory and Method*. Open University Press.
- Wood, J. (2006). Gang activity in English prisons: The prisoners' perspective. *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 12(6), 605–617. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10683160500337667>
- Wood, J., & Alleyne, E. (2010). Street gang theory and research: Where are we now and where do we go from here? *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 15(2), 100–111. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2009.08.005>

- Wood, J. L. (2014). Understanding gang membership: The significance of group processes. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 17(6), 710–729.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430214550344>
- XPL. (2013). Girls and gangs. *Centre for Social Justice*.
- Yardley, L. (2008). Demonstrating validity in qualitative psychology. *Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Research Methods*, 2, 235–251.
- Young, T., Fitzgibbon, W., & Silverstone, D. (2014). A Question of Family? Youth and Gangs. *Youth Justice*, 14(2), 171–185. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473225414537569>
- Zimmer, L. (2006). Qualitative meta-synthesis: A question of dialoguing with texts. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 53(3), 311–318.