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## **‘We’ll show you gang’: The subterranean structuration of gang life in London**

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## **‘We’ll show you gang’: The subterranean structuration of gang life in London**

### **Abstract**

This article uses data from interviews with 69 self-described members and associates of street gangs in London to explore how young people choose their actions and construct their identities from the material and cultural resources they find in their locales. It explores ‘drift’ as a potential explanation of actions of gang members and finds it wanting. It suggests that Giddens’ concept of structuration, when combined with Matza and Sykes’ notion of subterranean traditions, offers a powerful tool for the explanation of how and why some young people in socio-economically deprived urban areas seek association with gangs through the performance of violence.

### **Keywords**

Gangs, violence, youth, subterranean, structuration, drift

### **Introduction**

In recent years, the ‘gang’ has become the focus of blame for street violence in British cities (Hallsworth and Young, 2011). The conflation of violence with the notion of the gang is visible in the title of the government’s policy document, *Ending Gangs and Youth Violence* (HM Government, 2011), in politicians’ immediate, premature linkage of gangs to the 2011 UK riots (Daily Telegraph, 2011) and Metropolitan Police Service (2012) announcements that gangs are the source of the majority of stabbings and shootings in London. These official responses share a tendency, noted by Hallsworth and Young (2008), to engage in ‘gang talk’,

mythologising the gang as an entity that is itself responsible for violence. But gangs are not homogeneous corporate actors. They are the products of the specific actions of groups of people and the identities, names, and labels that people give to these actions.

British criminologists use a variety of theoretical frames to explain these actions. Deuchar (2009) utilizes the ideas of Bourdieu in discussing the social and cultural capital young Glaswegians bring to gang activities. Both Pitts (2008) and Hallsworth and Silverstone (2009) use political economic concepts in their explanations of the violence that has been attributed to gangs, but with radically different notions of the validity of the 'gang' label. While Pitts argues for the existence of gangs in London that would be recognisable from the extensive US literature, Hallsworth and Young (2008, 2011) have consistently refuted this. They argue that the economic marginality to which late capitalism has relegated large numbers of young people in London has led to violent, often self-destructive responses that are too diverse and complex to be reduced to the notion of the gang. Pitts, on the other hand, argues that these very conditions have encouraged the creation of hierarchical groups that not only seek to control territory and illegal markets, but also coerce 'reluctant gangsters' into their ranks.

Gunter (2008), in contrast, criticises the determinism that he spies in left realist or political economic accounts of young offenders, preferring instead to bring Matza's (1964) concept of 'drift' to the analysis of the actions of young, black men who move along the spectrum of 'badness' 'on road', from simply hanging out on the street to organised and premeditated acts of joint criminality.

In this article, we develop a theoretically informed analysis of the narratives given to us in interviews with self-described members and associates of gangs in London. We use their accounts in order to develop explanations of their actions, which include both the political economic conditions enveloping young people and the choices and interpretations that young people make within these material and cultural constraints. We reject the idea that drift provides

an adequate explanation, and suggest that a different idea of Matza and Sykes (1961)—that of subterranean values—can, when combined with Giddens’ (1984) ideas on structuration, provide more powerful explanations. The combination produces the hybrid concept of ‘subterranean structuration’ that has previously been applied to explain the link between drugs and crime (Stevens, 2011) and is used here as a way of thinking about the actions of young people who associate with gangs.

## **Method**

The data are derived from observations of and face-to-face interviews with self-nominated ‘members’ (n=52) and ‘associates’ (n=17) of 12 London ‘gangs’, drawn from six of Greater London’s 32 boroughs—socio-economically deprived geographic areas reported both in the media and in the literature to be inhabited by gangs and with relatively high rates of serious violence (see table 1). This study differs from some other studies of the gang phenomenon in Britain (e.g. Alexander, 2000; Pitts, 2008) in focusing on the experiences of people who claim the identity of a gang member for themselves rather than having it placed upon them by others. For these young people, in other words, the label of ‘gang’ had an objective meaning outside the pages of academic and press articles.

**[Insert table 1 here]**

We use a definition of ‘gang’ with four features. First, gangs are self-formed associations of peers that have adopted a common name and other discernible ‘conventional’ or ‘symbolic’ signals of membership (see Gambetta, 2009b, p. xix). Second, they are comprised of individuals who recognise themselves (and are recognised by others) as being ‘members’ of a ‘gang’ and who individually or collectively engage in or have engaged in a pattern of criminal

activity. Third, they are not fully open to the public and much of the information concerning their business remains confined within the group. Fourth, disputes within the group cannot be settled by an external ‘third party’ as established by the rule of law.

As supported by a large number of gang studies using diverse methodologies, ‘self-nomination’ with some validation is the most powerful measure of gang membership (see Curry, 2000; Decker and Van Winkle, 1996; Hagedorn, 1996). A ‘gang member’ identified himself or herself as being a member of a gang (through verbal statements, tattoos or correspondence), but also successfully answered a series of screening questions concerning the overall orientation of the gang they were claiming and had their membership vouched for by at least one other self-described gang member. A ‘gang associate’, by contrast, offended with gang members and were associated with them by law enforcement and criminal justice agencies or community information but they neither recognised themselves nor were recognised by others as a *bona fide* gang ‘member’.

All gang members and associates were identified and accessed through a ‘chain referral’ sampling method (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981), which despite its limitations (see Petersen and Valdez, 2005) is common in field studies of gangs (see Hagedorn, 1996) and other reticent or ‘hidden populations’ (Heckathorn, 1997, 2002). The chain referral started with practitioners working on the gang issue in the fieldwork boroughs and continued to the point of data saturation.

For reasons of confidentiality, the interviewees and their gangs are identifiable only by pseudonyms derived from popular comic book figures, allocated at random. We hope that this device will remind readers of the status of interviews as narrative (Presser, 2009). Interviewees were predominantly (77%) males with an ethnic identity associated with the Census category ‘Black or Black British’ (93%), a mean age of 20 (range: 13–34), and a three to four year average period of gang association (range: one to 14 years). Fifty-eight interviewees were

‘active’ at time of interview while 11 had ‘retired’ from active gang activities. Nineteen had served time either in an adult prison or young offender institution. They reported very high rates of violent victimisation. Nineteen interviewees had previously been threatened with guns, nine had been shot at and three actually had been shot; 55 had previously been threatened with knives and other weapons, 28 had been stabbed, and nine had been injured with other weapons; 41 had been robbed; and one had been kidnapped. All 69 interviewees also reported that they had family or friends who had been shot, stabbed, or beaten by gangs and at least seven reported that they had family or friends who had died as a result of gang violence.

All research participants gave informed consent. The ethics committee of the University of Oxford approved the study. Interviews were conducted by the first named author of this article between January 2008 and August 2009 and performed in pre-arranged public settings (e.g., classrooms, cafés, pubs, parks, playgrounds, even the alcoves and stairwells of tower blocks). Interviews were semi-structured in design (with emphasis on the nature and extent of gang business, organisation, and recruitment) but much more open-ended in practice, with an average duration of two hours (range: 30 minutes to five hours). Digital audio files were transcribed, anonymised, and coded thematically.

Black young people are disproportionately represented in our sample. This reflects the fact that current resources—and therefore the starting points for our chain referral—are almost exclusively focused on the black community. We do not claim that gangs are a specifically black phenomenon. Our data do allow us specifically to explore the views of some black young people of the effects of ethnicity and racial discrimination in creating gang activities and identities.

There is a risk that—as two middle-class white men—we are participating in the ‘scholarly erasure’ of lived black experience that is lamented by Brown and Clark (2003) and which may occur in several ways. As Sandberg and Pedersen (2009) found among the young

drug dealers that they met in Oslo, several of our interviewees were skilled in the language of the professionals with whom they come into contact; the language about them, not the language their experience lives in (Hallsworth and Young, 2008). In the interview situation, it has been assumed that gang members' general 'mistrust or wariness' of others exacerbates the possibility of understatement, exaggeration, concealment, or outright deception, which exists in any conversation (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991, p. 24). Others note a tendency for 'mythologising' and the exaggeration of interviewees' roles in violence and the group (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996, p. 49). In an effort to mitigate these risks and tendencies, we have adopted a theoretical and methodological perspective that prioritises our interviewees as active architects and narrators of their own experiences by asking them and enabling them to express their own 'repertoire of narratives' (Sandberg, 2010). We assume, along with Giddens (1984), that our interviewees can tap into both their discursive and practical consciousness in providing rationalisations for their actions. Our iterative coding and analysis of their words led to the formulation of the analytical themes that we present below.

## **Analysis**

The range of ages in our sample enabled us to look at different stages of association with gangs that occurred at different ages, and thereby reconstruct the temporal pattern of their association with gangs. Our construction of the themes below arose from the sequences and routines that interviewees talked about. Our analysis starts from their reports of the constraints of space and time, and of the experience of racism that faced interviewees before they joined gangs. It discusses how the cultural interpenetration of violence informs their narratives. It then relates how interviewees saw the gang as an alternative career, which enabled them to express their use of and resistance to material and cultural enablements and constraints. It shows how only young people with certain experiences and attributes are enabled to join gangs. It finishes



with a discussion of the unintended consequences of the subterranean gang career for people who wish to leave it behind, and of the reactions to gangs by state and other agencies. In this article, we focus on the interviewees' experience of poverty, racism and violence. These are the issues that they focused on. Astute readers will no doubt spot the issues of class and gender that are also present in the data. For reasons of space, we leave more detailed discussions of these issues to another article.

### *Constraints of space, resource and time*

Our interviewees described their lives in terms that echoed Vigil's (1988) concept of 'multiple marginality'. These 'urban outcasts' have been subjected to the triple forces that Wacquant (2007) describes: mass unemployment; relegation to neglected neighbourhoods; and stigmatisation along class and ethnic lines. Poverty in London has been increasingly spatially concentrated (Dorling et al., 2007). The boroughs included in this study have reported particularly high levels of young people who are 'NEET' (not in education, employment or training, LSEO 2012). Young people of African heritage have been particularly affected, with rates of unemployment of young black men in Britain (aged 16-24) recently reaching 56% (Ball, Milmo, and Ferguson, 2012).

This statistical evidence of multiple disadvantage was reflected in our interviewees' vivid descriptions of the constraints of resource, space, and time that they had to use in their lives. These constraints included: spatial enclosure within certain deprived areas of the city; the temporal experience of their own generation; and the lack of jobs that awaits this generation of young black people at the end of education. They were highly aware of the racial—if not the class-based—inequality in the distribution of resources and life chances.

Spatially, interviewees reported being confined to socio-economically deprived areas of the inner city where opportunities for valued employment and consumption were both absent:

There's no jobs, no opportunities here ... when you came here, what did you see? Bookies, off-license, chicken shop, pub, and ain't no nice pub but some, you know, with bare alcoholics sitting there all day. Dodgy mobile phone shop, pound shop, another chicken shop. I don't even know where the library is right now. This place is almost built like to encourage crime. (Nightcrawler)

Temporally, interviewees referred to the specific experiences of their own generation. By comparison to their grandparents' generation, many of whom arrived in the UK from the West Indies at a time of high employment, they saw little chance of getting a job that they valued. Available legitimate work was seen as overly restrictive, demeaning and too poorly paid. They learned this from the experience of their employed parents, which could be compared to younger exemplars of gang careers in their neighbourhoods. For example, Xavier said:

Too many times you're seeing, see your mum come back from work crying that it's still not enough money. ... They say work 9 to 5, don't sell drugs, but yet other young people out there are making a hell of a lot of money more than my mum.

The attainment of legal employment which is better paid requires months and years of deferred gratification through education and training, which, interviewees argued, was a wait too 'long':

Everything was long. I couldn't even be bothered to sit down and do my GCSEs because it was long. I couldn't even be bothered to sit down and revise because it's long. Couldn't be bothered to go school because it's long. (Mystique)

The unattractive length of the educational preparation for a conventional career could, due to the presence of gangs in their neighbourhoods, easily be compared with quicker routes to achieve the kind of high life that is commercially promoted in the films, music videos, computer games and adverts which are targeted at these young people. One gang member reported on this life of high profile consumption of designer clothes and dazzling nightlife:

You just spend money on nonsense, you spend like, a £1,000 on a jacket, do you know what I mean? Money just gets spunked on absolutely nothing. You might go out and spend £300, £400, £500 at a club. You know, you go out and buy the most expensive bottle of champagne, you know, instead of buying just shots of drinks, you'll buy the whole bottle. Yeah, they call it 'quick money' 'cus it goes quick. (Juggernaut)

In an era of high youth unemployment, moreover, education provided little guarantee of social mobility. Ironman observed, for example, 'My cousin went uni[versity], read his books dah, dah, dah. He still can't get a job. Man's in bare debt living off benefits'. Ironman's comment echoes recent research suggesting black graduates are three times more likely to be unemployed than white graduates within six months of leaving university (Elevation Networks Trust, 2012).

### *Interpretations of racism and violence*

Our interviewees grew up with social positions that are increasingly marginalised in British social and economic life. The resources which they could bring to the production and reproduction of daily routines were severely limited. Their families and neighbours have experienced disproportionate educational exclusion, unemployment, and underemployment. Here we concentrate on the constraints imposed by the social structuring of race, as this was the ‘principal modality’ (Hall et al., 1978, p. 347) through which interviewees sought to comprehend the disadvantage and discrimination that they experienced. The implication that some of our interviewees drew from their social position was that a dominant ‘white’ society had impeded all legal potential to realise their goals. They did not perceive their experiences as being anything to do with class, but they reported a heightened—even Mertonian—sense of exclusion from the achievement of legitimate goals and an awareness of crime as an alternative route to success. After describing the poor work rewards of his mother, Xavier asked:

So who are you to tell me not to go there? You’re going to slave me. You’re going to make me work for you and you’re going to tax me, you’re going to take all my money away from me? Basically I’m working for nothing. I’m working and yet my money’s just going to go back into your hand?

His use of the word ‘slave’ as a transitive verb links with Lizard’s perspective on how racism is a force that is used against him and so can also be used (by drawing on English folklore) to justify or neutralise offending.<sup>i</sup>

Being black is nuts, the odds are against us, man. People push us in the corner and force us to do things and then when we do, they go on like they are shocked and better than us. I refuse to go to work to get paid shit and treated like shit.

Look at my mum and how hard she works and it doesn't get her anywhere. Fuck asking, I'm taking. I'm like Robin Hood. Take from the rich to feed the poor.  
(Lizard)

The interviewees above evoke the legacy of black servitude in much the same fashion that Pryce's (1979, p. 56) research participants did over thirty years ago, considering the menial 'shit work' available to them as 'slave labour'. The experience of racism is both current and historically reproduced. Kingpin reported on the experience of his grandparents and how this had been passed down to him:

My grandparents, when they came here, were less than dogs in the eyes of some white people. No blacks, no dogs.<sup>ii</sup> They don't forget that. That gets passed down to their kids. ... My parents were in the [1981 Brixton] riots. They were there. So, it's projected onto us, their own prejudices, their own insecurities, ideas that the system's at fault, the system's racist. They tell us every day, never trust no one. So, you get this deep hatred; you hate the establishment from day one.

Kingpin's statement comes in the context of explaining the violence of his peers. Such violence was justified, by some of our interviewees, as being of the same order as the violence used by the government:

You got, alright, if you look at the Iraq war, Afghanistan, all these other wars that the Governments are planning, it's like they, they think that us young people we don't, we don't see it or we don't know what they're doing. ... So for a

Government, you're telling young people 'don't commit crime, don't do this, don't do that'. But yet you're flying off to other countries and fighting for things that does not belong to you, things that have no rights to do with you. And it's like if you're doing that then how do you expect the young people to behave?  
(Xavier)

This quote illustrates the mediatised interpenetration of valorised violence through both privileged and subordinated social groups. The young people we interviewed were highly aware that the British government sees violence as a legitimate means to pursue its own ends. They saw violence around them in their everyday lives (see also the experiences of Bullseye and Sunfire reported below), but they also saw governmental violence on their television screens. Violence is not confined to a separate culture of the street. It runs throughout British society, and has done from before the time that some of our interviewees' ancestors were violently taken from Africa to work as slaves on plantations in the Caribbean and elsewhere.

The experience of current economic exclusion from the fruits of consumerism, in combination with the contemporary and generationally transmitted experience of racism, was reported by interviewees to act as a motivation to break laws which lose normative legitimacy as they are perceived to be designed to serve the purposes of the social groups who are active in performing—through violence when it suits their purposes—the exclusion that has been experienced.

Faced with these constraints and these motivations, some of the young people who live in these places and at this time sought to combine conventionally culturally validated notions of material success with disdain for traditional work, hedonism and violence; the values that Matza and Sykes (1961) described as 'subterranean' (see also, Matza, 1961). They narrated how they did this through the construction of gang careers.

### *The gang as alternative career*

The younger people we met were fatalistic, not only about their slim chances of getting a decent job, but also about their prospects of living much longer than their twenties. Exodus described the surrounding ‘war zone’ that diminished his own perceived life expectancy as follows:

Drug-dealers trying to sell, crack fiends looking to steal or score, and gang members out to make a name for themselves. Fuck Afghanistan, we need troops out here. Every time man be leaving his yard he walks out into the gladiator’s arena. Sometimes it’s kill or be killed.

With this in mind, they looked for ways to spend their time and to win approval from their peers that did not involve lengthy education or menial labour. In line with the concept of the ‘extended present’ which Brannen and Nilsen (2002) apply to young people with limited occupational choices, they sought and created ways to pass time that did not depend on progressive advancement towards a distant future of prosperity. The presence of gangs—both mythical and actual—in their locales provided a form of knowledge that they could use to create alternative careers which were more oriented towards present needs and desires. Our interviewees could refer to a wide range of gang stories; including the London legends of the Krays and the Richardsons, the more recent mythologising of the Adams family of Clerkenwell and of the PDC and 28s of Lambeth (Pritchard, 2008), tales of the Yardies of Kingston, Jamaica, and the African American gangsters that feature so prominently in commercial rap music (Hagedorn, 2008). These forms of knowledge are passed between young people in these areas in the form of playground and street conversations, music videos, DVDs and YouTube

clips, online chat pages, tattoos and graffiti. The interviews provided opportunities for them to explain the rules that young people live by in the careers that some of them create from this cultural knowledge.

For example, Sunfire told us that she had formed a gang with a group of friends who gave themselves a name and fought with other groups of girls, before moving on to increasingly serious and premeditated offending, including assaults and drug dealing. She told us about her violent experiences (as both victim and offender), and the rule that violent promises had to be fulfilled if she wanted to maintain her gang career: ‘if you’re a fake you’re finished. Your career is finished.’ It was clear that she and other interviewees saw life in a gang as a ‘career’ with specific rules and routines.<sup>iii</sup>

Young (2003, p. 409) has argued that criminal transgression should not be seen as a substitute for work, but as ‘a sensual riposte to labour’. While our interviewees did describe the seductions of violence, drug taking, sex and spectacular nightlife that were afforded to them through membership of a gang, they (and especially the older interviewees) also talked about the more repetitive and mundane elements of the business of acquiring and selling drugs, of having to perform unpleasant, sometimes boring tasks that are set by organisational superiors, and of the prospects of recruitment and promotion. The subterranean career of the gang therefore has in common with professional careers that it combines opportunities to achieve pleasure, reward and status with unavoidable doses of drudgery and submission.

We should note, however, that interviewees’ use of the word ‘career’ to describe their involvement in gangs should not be taken to mean that they were planning (or had planned) strategic advancement through the progressive stages of a career in a gang. While the gangs we discussed with them did possess some forms of hierarchical structure (with a relatively wide base of ‘youngers’ being marshalled by a narrower group of ‘elders’ who in turn deferred to an inner circle of ‘generals’) (see Densley, 2013), this structure was more visible to the older



interviewees who could look down the hierarchy. Our younger interviewees did not always discuss explicit plans to scale this career ladder. Rather, they discussed the rules and routines that enabled them to negotiate current exigencies.

### ***Choice, trust, experience and the development of gang careers***

Only a small minority of people who grow up in the neighbourhoods we studied would describe themselves as members of gangs. From our interviews, it became clear that the interplay of motivations with social and cultural resources was crucial in explaining both who wants to join a gang and who goes on actually to develop a gang career. This combination of motivated choice with material constraint fits better with Giddens' (1984) concept of 'structuration' than it does with Matza's (1964) notion of 'drift'. Motivations to join a gang that are described above include exclusion from education and mainstream employment, the desire for 'quick money' and the status that goes with it, and the (mythically informed) adaptation of socially valorised violence to an inchoate and sometimes destructive resistance against racism. But not all the young people who share these motivations have the social and cultural resources that enable them to join a gang.

Interviewees stressed the role of trust in deciding who was accepted or selected to move from the ranks of those who hung out 'on the strip' into the more tightly closed networks of people who committed more lucrative crimes together. They commonly reported that entry to gangs was restricted to those who had prior connections to active gang members. People without such networks would find it much harder to forge the bonds of trust that interviewees described as protecting their activities from police scrutiny and rival predation (see Densley, 2012). These connections are a resource that some people were able to bring to the forging of gang careers. Such connections were often reported as being between early childhood friends

and relatives; fathers to sons, older brothers to younger brothers, cousins to cousins. Juggernaut observed that, 'If you're family, you're part and parcel of it. You've already proved yourself because you're part of that bloodline'.

Some young people have family experiences that mean they bring established levels of violent experience to the creation of their gang career. Bullseye's gang career began with his accompanying his father during criminal activity:

My dad would go debt collecting and make me and my brother beat them up. He told us, this guy stole our money. He was a drug dealer so it wasn't his money, but we didn't know. We need that money to eat, rah, rah, rah. And these were grown men, but they couldn't do us nothing 'cus they were scared of my dad and he's standing there watching. So I'm, 13, 14 [years old], beating up grown men, letting out all my frustration, and I'm thinking, this feels good. And my dad's, like, for the first time, he's like proud or something. So it started from there. Beating up grown men.

A number of interviewees described instances in which exposure to violence at home or in their community had primed them for a life of violence in gangs. Sunfire told us:

I had violence in my background. ... I saw my mum get smashed in every day when I was little so I was used to violence in my house, domestic violence, and that so fighting and doing stuff on the street wasn't anything new.

One could usefully envisage these connections and reputations in Bourdieu's terms as a form of social, or even street 'capital' (Deuchar, 2009; Sandberg and Pedersen 2009). However, to

do so would be to imply that one accepted the rather static and deterministic vision of agency that has been identified by critics of Bourdieu's concepts of capital and habitus (Jenkins, 1992; King, 2000).

### *Unintended consequences of gang careers*

Our older interviewees reported that the rules of the gang career were changing as they aged. Some had had enough of living in the 'extended present' and reported being tired of the gang life. Life 'on road' is a 'young man's game', said Hulk, aged 24. Scorpion, 25, reflected on the process of ageing:

When you're younger it's all about what you've got now and how fast you can get it. But then when you're older, remember you're more wiser when you're older, you're more mature so you're more, like, worried about what's going to happen to you, your family or what's going to happen to the people that you love. ... You've got more to lose. You can't, like, make a bullet bounce back off you. You can't make a stab wound not go in you.

The barriers to 'maturing out' did not, as might be expected from some myths of gang life, originate in gangs refusing to let members resign. We were told that peers in the gang are happy enough to let people leave under certain conditions because a truly 'reluctant gangster' (Pitts, 2008), with full access to the secrets of the group, threatens the longevity of the gang and the freedom of its members. Continuing members said they simply need assurances that former members will not divulge their secrets or provide evidence against them to the police. The problem remains of how to find alternative forms of occupation and meaning. The gang life leaves stigmata on former members. They often carry criminal records, violent reputations,

tattoos, scars, on-going vulnerability to reprisals and a residual territorial confinement into their uncertain futures. Daredevil observed,

[There's] places you can't go because you was in that certain gang, because of the stuff you've done. ... If I get seen I'm either going to get robbed, stabbed or whatever. ... there's certain areas now, like where my friend got killed, I can't really go 'cus, it'll be a problem.

For some of our 'retired' interviewees, youth work and church membership provided alternative, legitimised pursuits. But long-term unemployment, recurrent imprisonment and poverty awaits many of the people who do not perform the identities of the gang 'general' or the reformed youth worker as they age.

### ***Unintended consequences of official responses to gangs***

The combination of the presence of gangs, the absence of legitimate opportunities and the broader cultural validation of subterranean goals increases the likelihood that more young people will seek entry and progression in gang careers through the performance of spectacular violence. Such performances frighten other local young people into forming connections that they think can protect them (to this extent, our data did support the suggestion that some people who would otherwise be 'reluctant' seek association with gangs, see Pitts 2008, p. 103):

Out here you're not living under police protection. No matter how many times the police said they'll protect you, they're not going to protect you. So we find our own protection. We protect our own ... 'cus the police ain't doing shit for us, we police ourselves. We equip ourselves with tools to protect ourselves, you

understand? We're a phone call away. Where the police? Police just tell you to go file a report. (Chrome)

Some attempts to combat serious youth violence can also have the unintended consequence of strengthening the attraction of gangs. The areas we studied have seen substantial increases in stops and searches by the Metropolitan Police Service, often under Section 60 of the Police and Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, specifically intended to reduce knife carrying and violence, which enables police to designate areas in which they can stop and search vehicles and pedestrians with no need to establish reasonable suspicion prior to the search. Black young people are massively over-represented in the numbers searched, with some reporting being stopped over a hundred times each (EHRC, 2012; Shiner, 2011). Such negative experiences of the police can combine with a perceived lack of attention to the victimisation of black young people to validate the notion of joining a gang. For example, Frenzy said:

Me personally, I've had a bad experience with the police before as well so it makes you just hate them. It makes you want to do the opposite of what they want. So basically they kind of, like, trigger your desire to be part of this.

Young people in these areas face a double bind as they construct their identities. If they adopt the dress and demeanour of a 'neek' (a portmanteau word used to denote geeky nerds who concentrate on doing well in school), they face ridicule and violence from some of their peers. If they emulate the dress and swagger of a 'gangster', they face repeated interventions from the police. As Xavier defiantly stated:

You're automatically stereotyped. It's like all black people are criminals. [The police] got this policy where, more than three [people in a group], you're considered a gang so you automatically get stopped. ... After a time, you feel like, 'oh we a gang now? Okay, we'll show you gang'. (Xavier)

## **Discussion**

Our interviewees were young people who had grown up in a time and in places which gave them hard experience of educational exclusion, unemployment, inter-generationally transmitted racism and, in several cases, violent abuse or neglect from parents and other adults. They did not respond passively or deterministically to these disadvantages. And they were not essentially different to other members of the society they live in. They chose actions from the repertoire that was made available to them by their location in a certain time, place and cultural milieu (see also Back, 1996). Their immediate locale was suffused with a respect for violent exploit and high profile consumption. But these cultural aspects cannot be carved apart from the wider political economy, which also valorises violence, hedonism and consumerism. These are the values that Matza and Sykes (1961) identified as 'subterranean' in that they run under the skin of capitalism, suffusing it with the desire for consumption and novelty that has, according to Bauman (2007), become the defining, stratifying feature of contemporary society. As Young (2007) has noted, the subterranean has moved above ground since the time of Matza and Sykes. The 'bulimic' cultural absorption and structural rejection of some marginalised people is exemplified by their commitment to the high profile, instant gratification of 'turbo-charged capitalism'.

The presence of gangs in their spatial and cultural locales enabled our interviewees to incorporate these subterranean—but now widespread—values into rules and routines that

provided some structure and meaning to their lives, which they did not see as being feasible to achieve through mainstream education and employment. They used pre-existing social relationships and violent experiences in creating bonds of trust and performing activities which enabled their acceptance as a member of a gang. These performances were often violent. They were highly affective as well as instrumental in achieving certain social positions. These actions went on to influence the conditions of agency for themselves as they aged, and for their peers who were growing up around them. At the individual level, the likely unintended consequences of these actions included confirmation of long-term exclusion from mainstream labour markets and non-subterranean careers. A broader unintended consequence is the creation and confirmation of the gang career as a feasible choice for some of the other young people in these locales. By reacting to this phenomenon through repressive means, such as frequent stop and search, state agencies also risk the unintended consequence of confirming the desirability of this choice. The feeding back of the unintended consequences of the actions of both gang members and the police into the creation of the conditions of agency for other young people fits very well with Giddens' (1984) structuration concept. It is an advantage of this concept, over Bourdieu's concept of capital, that it includes an explanation of the dynamic reproduction of social constraints on agency; an explanation that emphasizes the productive nature of the interaction between agency and structure.

Despite recent advocacy by both Gunter (2008) and Ferrell (2012), the concept of drift cannot explain this pattern of actions. While the concept offers a usefully descriptive metaphor of how people negotiate the cultural contradictions and alienation of late modernity by moving between transgressive and mainstream identities, it cannot explain these actions. This is because, as Melossi (2008) has noted, the concept of drift blocks the analysis of agency. Matza (1964, p. 29) saw delinquency as the destination of 'drift' by people 'who lack the position, capacity or inclination to become agents in their own behalf'. In contrast, Giddens (1989)

repeatedly insists that all social action involves agency, and so requires us to look at the conditions and contents of such agency. If, as Gunter (2008) argues, we need to add individual choice to the political economic explanation of contemporary youth offending, the concept of drift cannot help us.

Many authors have observed the various disadvantages that some young people live with and ascribed their offending to these circumstances, rather than to their own choices. This critique most obviously applies to Merton's (1938) and later formulations of anomie-strain theory, which—despite the best efforts of Messner and Rosenfeld (1994) and of Agnew (1992)—have failed to avoid Katz's (1988) charge that the focus on environmental and institutional contexts forces neglect of the foreground choices that people make in creating transgressive identities for themselves. Compared to some other attempts to overcome the structure-agency problem (e.g., the approach of Bourdieu), Giddens' (1984) structuration theory has been less frequently applied criminologically (a notable exception being Farrall and Bowling, 1999).

However, Giddens has often been criticised for emphasising agency at the expense of structure (e.g., by Furlong and Cartmel, 2007). Vaughan (2001, p. 198) specifically accuses him of denying the 'stratified nature of social reality' by conflating structure into agency. Giddens has repeatedly rejected both the dualism of structure and agency and their conflation. He has insisted that rules and resources that are structurally provided limit the range of options from which each of us can choose (Giddens, 1989). Such rules and resources were central to the explanations that our interviewees gave us of their gang activities and identities. We therefore agree with the depiction of urban street violence by both Bourgois (1997) and Hallsworth and Silverstone (2009, p. 374) as 'a self-destructive response to the conditions which late capitalism has created'. We accept Joseph and Gunter's (2011) point that the structural position of disadvantaged young black men cannot by itself explain their criminal



activities. But we insist, along with both Hallsworth and Young (2011) and Ray (2011), that issues of race, culture and violence cannot be separated from the political economy in which they are formed. We therefore argue that combining the concept of subterranean values with that of structuration helps us to advance understanding of the narrated activities of gang members and the separate, but related, phenomenon of street violence. It is capable of integrating the insights of cultural criminologists (Ferrell, Hayward, and Young, 2008; Katz, 1988; Young, 2003) on the seductions of crime and the performance of cultural scripts, and those of their subcultural predecessors (Brake, 1985; Cohen, 1980) on ‘magical solutions’ to the contradictions lived out by young people in socio-economically deprived areas, with a more productive account of the nature of human agency.

## **Conclusion**

Our talking with gang members has suggested to us, in line with other critical commentators in this area, that the influences of class, place, gender and ethnicity are as vital to the understanding of the relationship between young people and violence as they have always been. These facets of social structure are, as Giddens (1984) insists, enabling as well as constraining. We have emphasised our interviewees’ awareness of the interpenetration of the subterranean values of hedonism, instant consumption and violence across classes and throughout the late modern political economy. The values they adhere to are not fundamentally ‘other’ to the values which shape the society they live in. Combined with the concentration of poverty and an absence of education or employment that is valued by many young residents of London, the pursuit of these values has enabled the creation of cultural locales in which some of these people, and especially those most affected by the direct experience of social exclusion, racism and violent victimisation, choose to create a form of career in a gang. They do so by

using structural and cultural resources to learn and reproduce rules and routines through which they can achieve this short-term and often harmful solution to the problems that are given to them by their structural positions and their personal biographies. We must consider them as agents in their own right, grappling as we all are with the constraints and enablements of social structure. We can do this by analysing the actions through which young people and others create gang identities as an example of subterranean structuration.

If we do so, we can identify evident dangers in current responses to the identification of the 'gang problem'. These have included widespread use of stop-and-search. As noted above, this has the potential to confirm people in their wish to defy norms of placid conventionality by 'showing' the gang life. We know from the Edinburgh Study and others that negative interactions with the police can be worse than none at all for young people who may be disposed to offending (Klein, 1969; McAra & McVie, 2005; Short & Strodtbeck, 1965).

Another policing response has been the priority given to targeting violent gang members for incarceration. This may have the benefits both of incapacitating these individuals and also providing incentives to others to avoid violence, in line with the tactic of 'pulling levers' (Braga & Weisburd, 2012). But we know from the US examples that reductions in violence that come from pulling these levers are not always sustained. The famous reduction in youth homicides in Boston that has been associated with *Operation Ceasefire* was followed by a rise in violence, as the partnership that pulled the levers fell apart (Braga, Hureau, & Winship, 2008). From California to New York, as states instituted special sentencing provisions for gang-related crimes and waged a war of attrition at street level, young people of ethnic minority origin steadily and systematically moved from the streets to jail, assimilating street gangs into prison gangs and unifying drug markets (see Bjerregaard, 2003; Curtis, 2003; Fleisher et al., 2001; Sánchez-Jankowski, 2003; Wacquant, 2001). Reduced physical presence

and visual control, in turn, can encourage other gangs to encroach upon territory, resulting in more violence as outsiders fight to take control (Sobel and Osoba, 2009).

All this suggests an agenda for research with British people who claim or aspire to membership of gangs. We need to know more about the differences and similarities in gang activities between cities, genders, and ethnicities. We need to rigorously test the effectiveness of the myriad interventions that are springing up in response to the identification of the gang as a British problem. And we need to develop political and economic strategies that can shift the social constraints and enablements that encourage young people to associate with gangs through violence in the first place.

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**Table 1. Demographic statistics for the research setting**

<i>Location</i>	<i>Area (sq mile)</i>	<i>Population<sup>1</sup></i>	<i>Population Density (per sq mile)<sup>1</sup></i>	<i>% Black and minority ethnic<sup>1</sup></i>	<i>Rank in terms of average deprivation<sup>2</sup></i>	<i>Un-employment<sup>3</sup></i>	<i>Homicides 2000-10 (London borough rank)<sup>4</sup></i>
London	607	8,174,000	13,466	40	-	9%	1,693
Croydon	33.6	363,400	10,163	28	125	10%	69 (8)
Hackney	7.4	246,300	28,495	56	2	9%	100 (4)
Haringey	11.4	254,900	19,668	33	18	10%	77 (6)
Lambeth	10.4	303,100	26,382	38	19	10%	131 (1)
Lewisham	13.6	275,900	19,047	34	39	10%	62 (10)
Southwark	11.1	288,300	24,633	38	26	11%	102 (3)

1. Source: 2011 Census.

2. Source: Department for Communities and Local Government (2007). N.B. Out of the 354 local authorities in England, where “1” is the most deprived. Hackney is in the one per cent most deprived boroughs, Haringey and Lambeth in the five per cent most deprived, Lewisham and Southwark in the ten per cent most deprived, and Croydon in the 25 per cent most deprived.

3. Source: London’s Poverty Profile (2012)

4. Source: MPS Borough Level Crime Figures 2000/01 to 2009/10 (Wikipedia, 2012a)

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> As seen from several quotes in this article, techniques of neutralisation (Sykes and Matza, 1957) were often used by our interviewees, and in particular ‘condemnation of the condemners’. This supports our argument that our interviewees do not dysfunctionally subscribe to deviant values, but rather pay homage to culturally accepted values through their neutralisations of acts that others would label as deviant.

<sup>ii</sup> ‘No blacks, no dogs’ is a reference to the infamous signs that were placed in the windows of some pubs and rented accommodation during the post-war immigration of workers from the West Indies to the UK.

<sup>iii</sup> Career is a concept that has recently been subject to individualist, neo-liberal interpretations in the ‘new career literature’ that emphasises individual choice. Rather, in line with the recommendations of Cuzzocrea and Lyon (2011), we use it as a sociological concept to examine the interplay between structure and agency through the narrative framings that interviewees deploy.