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# **Why gang members commit more crime: Group processes and social cognitive explanations**

**Jane L Wood**

## **Abstract**

That gangs facilitate increased levels of deviancy in members is a consistent research finding. However, it is not fully clear why this is so. This chapter seeks to explain this effect by examining first the likely impact that group processes have on gang members and second the likely social cognitive effects that gang membership is likely to elicit. It concludes by noting the importance of psychology in gang membership and how psychologists need to develop further research to explain the specifics of gang membership as it impacts on youth.

**Keywords:** Gangs, groups, social cognition, deviance

Gang members generally have higher rates of *delinquency than nonmembers.....but they have statistically significantly higher rates only when they are in the gang.* (Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith & Tobin, 2003, p. 121).

Group membership is a fundamental aspect of human social existence. Most people will become members of several groups across the lifespan. Family groups, ethnic groups, friendship networks and work groups provide an infrastructure to our identities and enable us to define who we are - and who we want to be. Most groups provide us with key aspects of life. They help to shape our beliefs, attitudes, feelings and behaviors and many provide us with support, love and loyalty. However, groups can also provide negative influences - albeit via positive mediums such as support and loyalty. Gangs are examples of such groups. Gangs can provide members with positive elements such as protection, support and loyalty but they can also promote and facilitate violence, which results in gang members contributing disproportionately to crime levels, especially crimes of violence (e.g. Chu, et al., 2012). To date there is a paucity of research examining specifically the psychological processes that underpin gang membership and its associated increase in delinquent behavior. The purpose of this chapter is to consider the psychological effects that group and social cognitive processes have on individual gang members and how these fundamental processes contribute to the escalation in delinquency of individual gang members.

### **Gang members: delinquency levels**

It is accepted that street gang membership facilitates violent behavior over and above association with offender peers, even prolifically offending peers (Klein, Weerman & Thornberry, 2006). However, other findings note how once they have left the gang, gang members' involvement in violent events is not worse than nongang comparison groups (e.g. Melde & Esbensen, 2012). This suggests that there is something specific about gang

membership that facilitates delinquency and particularly violent delinquency. Yet, to date there are no conclusive explanations as to why delinquency escalates with gang membership.

Criminological theories such as social disorganization (Thrasher 1927; Shaw & McKay, 1942), cultural transmission of criminogenic norms (Shaw & McKay 1942), differential association (Sutherland 1937), strain theory (Cohen, 1955), differential opportunity (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960), control theory (Gottfredson & Hirschi 1990; Hirschi 1969), have provided gang researchers with a century's worth of valuable propositions and empirical findings. However, these theories have each been accused of being limited in what they can tell us about gang membership and its influence at an individual level. For instance they have been charged with considering youth as motiveless vessels that are simply filled with societal burdens (e.g. Emler & Reicher, 1995). They have been charged with taking a unidirectional rather than a reciprocal view of the causal factors of delinquency (e.g. Thornberry, 1987). And they have been charged with paying scant attention to the social psychological processes involved in gang membership (e.g. Thornberry et. al, 2003; Wood & Alleyne, 2010).

With foundations based in Durkheim's tradition of social control, Thornberry (1987) developed Interactional theory to address some of the theoretical gaps in gang research. Interactional theory builds on existing criminological theories by taking a reciprocal perspective of gang membership. It posits that gang membership results from a mutual relationship between the individual and: peer groups, social structures (e.g. poor neighborhood and poor family), weakened social bonds, and a learning environment that fosters and reinforces delinquency (Hall, Thornberry, & Lizotte, 2006).

Interactional theorists, noting the prevalent and persistent finding in existing research (e.g. Short & Strodtbeck, 1965; Hagedorn, 1998) that gang members have higher levels of

delinquency than nongang youth, identified three theoretical models to explain the relationship between gang membership and delinquency (see Thornberry, 1998; Thornberry, Krohn, et al., 1993). The first, selection model, maintains that gangs recruit members based on their existing high levels of delinquency. This 'kind of person' model posits that gangs do not cause their members' delinquency - but rather they enlist already delinquent youth. If this model is accurate it would logically be expected that gang members would have consistently high levels of delinquency before, during and after their gang membership. In other words, delinquency rates for these youth would not differ with gang membership.

The second model is facilitation. This kind of group model proposes that gang members do not differ from nonmembers in their levels of delinquency. However, when they become gang members the group processes and normative structures of the gang work to facilitate their delinquency. In short, gang membership causes an increase in delinquent behavior. If this model is accurate then we would expect that gang members' delinquency rates would be higher than nonmembers' levels - but only whilst they are in a gang. Before gang membership and after gang membership their delinquency levels should not differ from nonmembers' levels.

The third model, enhancement, is a kind of person combined with a kind of group model and is therefore a hybrid of the previous two models. This model suggests that selection and facilitation effects work in concert to create the high levels of delinquency in gang members. The accuracy of this model would be supported if gang members have **1.** higher levels of delinquency than nonmembers when they are not the gang and **2.** their levels of delinquency escalate during the period of gang membership.

In their longitudinal examination of these potential models Thornberry, et al., (2003) found no evidence to support the selection model – that is, gang members were not

significantly more delinquent than nonmembers before or after gang membership. They did however, find consistent evidence to support a facilitation effect – that is, gang members’ delinquency increased substantially during their gang membership. Importantly, the research also showed that when members leave the gang their delinquency levels decrease. There was also some limited support for an enhancement effect since some gang members had somewhat higher delinquency rates than nonmembers before joining a gang - but these rates spiraled dramatically when they joined a gang.

Research evidence is, however, not conclusive on which of the three models best describes pre and post gang delinquency levels, (see Lacourse et al., 2003, and Hall et al., 2006). This may be due to the individual differences of gang members, which is acknowledged by Interactional theory when it notes that not all gang members are alike. For instance, whilst some youth are stable and enduring (**core**) members, others are temporary or transient (**peripheral**) members (e.g. Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Thornberry, et al., 2003; Alleyne & Wood, 2010) and research suggests that these differences in membership commitment may be influenced by pre-gang delinquency levels. That is, youth who had high levels of delinquency before becoming gang members are more likely to become core members, whilst youth who were not prior delinquents are more likely to be peripheral members (Gatti et al., 2005). Nonetheless, during gang membership both core and peripheral gang members are more deviant than nongang youth (e.g. Alleyne & Wood, 2010) and this supports the prevailing consensus that regardless of delinquency levels before or after gang membership, during their time in a gang members’ delinquency levels are likely to escalate significantly. As Thornberry et al., observe:

“Put simply, when gang members are in a gang, their behavior worsens; when they are not in a gang, it improves.” (Thornberry, et al., 2003, p. 185).

## **Becoming a gang member: group processes**

Gangs probably form for the same reasons that any other groups form - because they offer members something that they want or need (Goldstein, 2002), yet so far, research has paid little attention to gangs as groups (Hughes, 2013). Gangs are acknowledged as reflecting universal needs among young people for status, identity and companionship (Klein, 1995). Gangs are perceived as offering a way to gain respect (Anderson, 1999) and they radiate social powers that attract youth (Knox, 1994). They emit a coercive power (threat or use of force and violence) and a power to pay, buy, impress, and delegate status to members (Knox, 1994). As a result, young boys look up to gang members, mimic them, and aspire to gang membership (Hughes & Short, 2005). Media portraits of gangs such as gang films depicting characters rewarded for gang-like behaviors act as a blueprint for young aspiring gang members (Przemieniecki, 2005) and youth living in a culture that strongly identifies success with material wealth are particularly motivated to gang membership (Toy & Stanko, 2008). Research shows that youth who experience feelings of alienation and stress within legitimate social controls such as the family, education, and community contexts are motivated to join gangs (e.g. Marshall, Webb & Tilley, 2005). Gangs offer members friendship, pride, identity development, enhanced self-esteem, excitement, and financial resources that may not be available legitimately (Goldstein, 2002). They also offer group protection, alleviation of fears, emotional bonding and a sense of belonging (Vigil, 1988), a strong psychological sense of community, a physical and psychological neighborhood, a social network, and social support (Goldstein, 1991). Consequently, youth may adapt, modify, or discard their existing social controls in favor of what they perceive as the attractive or even “glamorous” attributes of gang membership.

### **Gang identity and identifying with the gang**

Gangs have a group identity without which we could not discuss gangs and gang membership and a central hallmark of that identity is involvement in criminal activity (Weerman et al., 2009). As Klein and Maxson (2006) note, "Crime and group identity are not merely fellow travelers in the gang world: they are mutual reinforcers." (p. 205). Consequently, deviant behavior has, for many, but not all (see Wood & Alleyne (2010) for a fuller discussion) become integral to a gang's group identity and a defining characteristic for many researchers. For example, the Eurogang Network defines a gang as: "a street gang (or troublesome youth group corresponding to a street gang elsewhere) is any durable, street-oriented youth group whose identity includes involvement in illegal activity." (Weerman et al., 2009; p. 20). In this definition the group's identity refers specifically to what is normal and accepted behavior for the group - and, in this definition, criminal activity (rather than nuisance behavior) is important. However, although individual members, must, by virtue of their membership, contribute to the creation and maintenance of the group's identity the definition does not refer to their personal self-image (Weerman et al., 2009), which leaves us knowing little about how the group's identity helps shape a youth's personal identity.

Research suggests that a youth's personal identity can be forged within a gang if they focus on how their individual needs can combine with the group's characteristics and function (Vigil, 1988). This conceptualization of how group membership may help shape a youth's social identity is supported by evidence from social psychology. For instance, the social identity approach, which includes social identity theory and self-categorization theory, maintains that the extent to which an individual identifies with a group helps dictate the view that they have of themselves and also how they behave (Tajfel, 1972). A key tenet of the social identity approach is that part of an individual's self concept (i.e. how they think about themselves) develops from their membership of groups (e.g. Hogg & Reid, 2006). If gangs offer youth power, status, identity, friendship etc. (as outlined above), then this would suggest



that gang membership may help youth develop a more positive self concept (i.e. people like me, I have a lot of friends, I am worth knowing). Social psychology also shows how group membership can influence the way individuals feel about themselves. The self-esteem hypothesis points out that people are motivated to have a positive view of themselves (Hogg & Abrams, 1988) and research shows how group membership can increase members' self esteem - even if their association with the group is limited to basking in reflected glory (e.g. supporting a successful football team). The positive affect that people experience from their group membership then serves to cement their association with the group (e.g. Cialdini et al., 1976). For instance, research demonstrates how youth who feel good about their abilities as students, translate this positive affect in to confidence about having a successful career in the future - which, in turn, makes them less interested in becoming gang members (Dukes et al., 1997). In contrast, youth who join gangs do not generally feel good about themselves in an academic sense, have comparatively lower confidence in their educational abilities and are less integrated in to legitimate social institutions such as school (Dukes et al., 1997). However, their gang membership helps enhance their self esteem by providing support and affirmation of them as members and, when the gang's esteem increases (mainly due to success in delinquent and antisocial activities) so too does the individual self esteem of previously low esteem gang members (Duke et. al, 1997).

So, it is possible to see how youth may identify with a gang - especially if available alternatives (e.g. school) are unsuccessful and lack appeal. Once they have identified with a gang whose identity is characterized by its deviant activity then the chances are that the member will adopt a deviant lifestyle - on behalf of the gang. Research examining social identity in gang members shows how identifying with a gang can dramatically reduce the deterrence effect of potential punishment for delinquency (Hennigan & Spanovic, 2012). This research showed that youth who identified with their gang, compared to nongang youth, put

gang norms of deviancy before any personal concerns they had regarding being caught and punished for criminal activity. As Hennigan and Spanovic (2012) note: “Since crime and violence are normative among gang-involved youth, personal estimates of getting caught and punished have little or no influence on their criminal and violent behaviors.” (p. 143).

Consequently, it seems that identifying with a gang can counteract the effects of deterrents such as potential punishment that work to prevent nongang youth from offending. In short, identifying with a gang is likely to help increase a youth’s involvement in deviant behavior.

### **Conformity, pluralistic ignorance, and cohesion**

When people join a group they are likely to experience pressure to conform to group norms. The considerable power of normative influences was neatly demonstrated by Asch’s (1951) classic research which demonstrated how people will conform to decisions made by others (in this case confederates of the researcher) on issues as trivial as deciding the length of lines - even when those others are clearly wrong. Findings further show that people want to be accepted and that they will comply with social norms in order to gain others’ approval (Cooper, Kelly & Weaver, 2004). This is especially true if they value or admire the group (e.g. David & Turner, 1996) and, as noted above, gangs may be admired by youth - particularly youth who have become alienated from legitimate social controls - such as family or school. Once they have been admitted into the group, members become more willing to accept social influences from the group - especially if they strongly identify with it (Cooper et al., 2004). However, group members are also likely to adhere to and follow ingroup norms because they fear the social sanctions that may result following norm violation (e.g. Rimal & Real, 2003) and rejection by friends or by admired others is especially threatening (Baron & Kerr, 2003). So, given the power of ingroup influences and individuals’ readiness to accept them, it seems likely that youth who join gangs, compared to nongang youth, will experience greater social pressures to become involved in group norms such delinquency (Viki &

Abrams, 2012). Even if group members accept the group's norms, it does not necessarily follow that they always agree with them. Pluralistic ignorance refers to when individuals privately reject a social norm but still go along with it because they believe (often wrongly) that other group members accept it (O'Gorman, 1986). Because each group member believes that they are alone in their private rejection of the norm, no one publicly opposes it and this, in turn, perpetuates the belief among group members that the norm is accepted by the majority. To illustrate, research with university students has shown that although most students believed that other students were happy with the drinking habits of other students, they personally were not comfortable with the accepted levels of drinking (Prentice & Miller, 1993).

Pluralistic ignorance has also been noted in gang activity where, gang members privately expressed extreme discomfort with some of their criminal activities (e.g. Matza, 1964). Consequently, gang members may adhere to and publicly support gang norms which they privately reject. The net effect of this is that some gang members may go along with acts of deviance that they might not, on their own, become involved in. However, there is also evidence that the more that a person identifies with their chosen group, the more likely they will be to believe in the group norms (e.g. Reid, Cropley & Hogg, 2005). This suggests that core gang members may genuinely endorse the accepted group norms that more peripheral gang members may privately reject. Either way, regardless of whether gang members' private beliefs are consistent or inconsistent with group norms, gang members are likely to publicly accept group norms and behave in accordance with them. If those norms involve delinquency then it is feasible that gang members will become more delinquent as they keep up with the prescribed norms of their group. In turn, involvement in delinquency can contribute to gang cohesiveness (Klein & Maxson, 2006).

Cohesion underpins a gang's social interactions and its behaviours (e.g. Klein, 1995). It is claimed that gang cohesion derives from three processes: (1) the attraction that members feel towards the gang and its members; (2) the motivation that members have to participate in the gang's activities and to contribute to the overall goals of the gang; and (3) the coordination of gang member effort (Goldstein, 2002). Psychological perspectives on cohesion stem from contributions in the 1940s and 1950s by Festinger and his colleagues, who defined cohesion as a "field of forces" which works on individuals to remain in the group (Festinger, Schachter & Back, 1950). Social psychologists explain cohesion as a bi-dimensional construct consisting of vertical cohesion, derived from the extent that members trust and respect the group's leaders and horizontal cohesion, derived from the feelings, respect and trust that members have for each other. A further bi-dimensional conceptualization of cohesion is perceived cohesion which is, "...an individual's sense of belonging to a particular group and his or her feelings of morale associated with membership in the group." (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990, p. 482). Thus, perceived cohesion reflects the individual's evaluation of his/her relationship with their group and this is derived from cognitive elements such as their appraisal of their experiences within the group and from affective elements based on their feelings about those experiences.

Cohesion is considered to be a powerful driving force in a group's functioning. It is in Klein's (1995) words, "...the quintessential group process." (p. 43). A meta-analysis examining group cohesion has shown how highly cohesive groups are more productive than less cohesive groups (Evans & Dion, 1991) and as Klein, (1995) observes, gangs produce crime. Cohesion can generate loyalty, commitment and sacrifice from group members who regard the group with pride and respect (Crocker et al., 1994). In turn, this produces a form of group esteem which replaces individual self-esteem (Vigil, 1988). Hence, cohesiveness in gangs may be expected to lead to high levels of delinquency and violence as members

identify strongly with their group, share similar attitudes and are willing to adhere to group norms that endorse criminality (Hughes, 2013). Highly cohesive gangs may also be more efficient in mobilizing their membership and accessing commodities such as drugs and weapons (Hughes, 2013).

However, cohesion has been found to work both ways. Although some research findings suggest that low cohesion results in low levels of delinquency (e.g. Klein, 1971), other findings suggest that gangs do not need to be cohesive to be delinquent (e.g. Jansyn, 1966). Hughes (2013) further notes how low cohesion can contribute to increased levels of delinquency since low cohesion may result in members fighting among themselves. Indeed, evidence suggests that gang member murders occurs more within gangs than between gangs (Decker & Curry, 2002). Consequently, it seems that cohesiveness - either strong or weak - is a factor that contributes to elevated levels of delinquency among gang members.

### **Intergroup conflict and status enhancement**

Social psychologists argue that groups only exist because there are outgroups (e.g. Hogg, 2004) and so people need to sort out where they belong in reference to others (Bruner, 1957). This understanding then forms the basis for action in social contexts. For example, belonging to a gang provides a meaningful understanding of one's relationship with members of one's own gang, with members of other gangs, non-gang members and the police (Viki & Abrams, 2012). To achieve this understanding, people employ the basic cognitive process of categorization. Categorization enables not only an understanding of self and others' social group membership, but also allows the individual to attach an emotional value to those groups (Tajfel, 1978). Social psychological findings have robustly demonstrated how people use the categorization process as a foundation for biases - which may be derived from the barest minimum of information - even about one's own group. For instance, classic research shows how temporary groups founded arbitrarily (e.g. minimal groups - grouped by whether

they over- or under-estimated numbers of dots on a piece of paper), with no history of conflict and no potential for future conflict, resulted in ingroup favoritism when members were asked to allocate money to anonymous ingroup or outgroup others (e.g. Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Various explanations have been offered for this minimal group effect. For instance, some assert that ingroup favoritism occurs because people assume that this is what is expected of them (Wilder, 1986) or that people expect ingroup members to show reciprocal favoritism (e.g. Jetten et al., 1996). Whatever the explanations, and work is still being conducted to establish the reasons for the minimal group effect, the upshot is that people are prone to create 'them and us' categorizations and then use these as a basis to make distinctions.

Gangs are no exception to this categorization approach. Gangs are often formed according to members' region of origin (e.g. Densley, 2013) and their identities defined by their reference to other gangs - in particular, their existing intergroup conflict with such gangs (Papachristos, Hureau, & Braga, 2013). In short, gangs use other groups as a point of reference, by which they assess their own actions and status (e.g. Decker, 1996). Social psychological theories such as Social Dominance Theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) help to explain the processes that underpin group competition for status. Social Dominance Theory explains that group members who have a high social dominance orientation (SDO) may feel compelled to enhance, or reinforce, the place of their group within a social hierarchy. To achieve status, the theory goes on to explain, social hierarchies may be arbitrarily constructed to respond to situational factors such as competition for valued resources and these arbitrary hierarchies generally involve informal groups such as gangs. So, for example, street gangs may strive to enhance or reinforce their status in comparison to other street gangs in an arbitrary-set system where illegal resources (e.g. narcotics) are the valued resource. Although research examining social dominance theory in the context of gangs is still in its infancy,

findings so far indicate that individuals involved in gang activity have high levels of SDO (e.g. Wood et al., in press).

Efforts to enhance the gang's status, or in response to what they perceive as threats to its existing reputation, often trigger inter-gang violence (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Aldridge & Medina, 2008). As Densley, (2013) observes, "Violence is central to gang life..." (p. 118) and gang members consider violence as a necessary response to protect territory and/or gang business. As a result, intergroup conflict is common between rival gangs (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1996) and functions on a struggle for power and domination built on reputation, respect and status (Harding, 2012). Transgressions cannot go unpunished and reciprocation is perhaps the most common reason for gang violence (e.g. Hughes and Short 2005; Papachristos 2009) as gangs address a perceived wrong or block a threat. In turn, this helps gangs to save face, protect members and exact revenge on opponents (Papachristos, Hureau, & Braga, 2013). It also sends the message that the gang is able to look after its interests and its membership- which accordingly, enhances the gang's existing reputation (Papachristos et al., 2013).

Gangs offer members the chance to enhance their personal social status and, as research shows this occurs in those involved in prison gang activity (e.g. Wood et al., in press; Wood, Moir, & James, 2009; South & Wood, 2006) and street gangs where both core and peripheral members value social status more than do nongang youth (e.g. Alleyne & Wood, 2010). Once they have joined a gang the acquisition of social status emerges from the reputation that the individual develops as a gang member. Reputation enhancement theory contends that youth will select a self-image that they want to display in front of specific others (Emler & Reicher, 1995). These others then provide feedback that reinforces the image that the individual member wants to develop within the group. For gang members bent on developing their reputation within the gang, delinquency will be key since delinquency is a

valued gang product. Delinquency, particularly violence, also serves as a defense mechanism which protects the member from being victimized (Emler & Reicher, 1995).

Research shows how gang members have normalized violence by using it even when committing ‘petty crimes’ (Harris et al., 2011). Research also confirms the tenets of reputation enhancement theory by showing how violence is used to achieve status, enhance reputations as well as to express members’ commitment to the gang’s activities and to avoid being excluded from the group (Harris et al., 2011). In short, violence is gang currency by which members negotiate their positions in the gang. As Densley, (2013; p. 85) observes in his ethnographic study of gang youth, “Interviewees were clear that serious violence was the fastest way to rise to the top.” However, the caveat to this was that violence should be sufficient to enhance both the individual’s and the gang’s reputation, but not so much that it attracts too much police attention and threatens gang business (Densley, 2013). Gang members also consider violence as necessary for obtaining material possessions and a comfortable high status lifestyle (Harris et al., 2011). The authors further observed that gang members expected an extremely violent response from any member whose status was being undermined:

“Not reacting with often extreme violence was experienced as tantamount to abject failure. There was a sense of being worse than nothing if a once-held status is lost. This was not only due to loss of respect, but also a sense of inevitable attacks and victimisation from others.” (Harris et al., 2011; p. 20).

So, for a youth joining a gang, becoming more deviant than they were - even if they were already deviant - may be essential for developing and maintaining a positive reputation as a gang member. Elevated deviance appears to be a norm for many gangs and the expectation that gang members will behave violently to achieve and maintain personal and



gang status is probably one of the main reasons why gang membership increases delinquency. The value that gang members attach to status and the necessity of delinquency in achieving and maintaining status as a gang member, suggests that delinquency levels will always increase with gang membership for as long as gang membership is perceived as providing status and reputation.

### **Being a gang member: Social cognitive processes**

Whilst it is useful to understand the group processes that contribute to an escalation in delinquency, particularly violent delinquency, during gang membership, we still know little about the specific psychological influences that joining a gang has on individual members which help to facilitate this escalation. As already noted (see above) criminological theories that explain gang membership pay little attention to the social psychological processes involved in gang membership (Thornberry et. al, 2003). However, this is changing as individual differences gain conceptual importance in the study of gangs.

The Unified theory of gang involvement (see Wood & Alleyne, 2010) draws on both criminological and psychological concepts to explain why youth may or may not join a gang. It illustrates pathways in to gang membership as well as pathways into delinquency more generally and pathways that avoid delinquency and/or gang membership. However, importantly, it also highlights the importance of the development and influence of social cognitions and attitudes that may be associated with delinquent behavior and gang membership. For instance, the theory also explains how gang members' existing social cognitions and attitudes will be shaped as they are exposed to group norms, new informal social controls and new or increased opportunities for criminal learning and involvement in criminal activity. Although still in its infancy this theory posits that greater attention needs to

be paid to the psychological processes that influence individuals as they become gang members.

### **Moral disengagement**

Unified theory maintains that to become criminally active, youth will need to learn how to set aside their existing moral standards (morally disengage). This strategy is necessary for them to be able to justify their personal involvement in deviant behavior. Moral disengagement is a social cognitive process that enables individuals to justify harmful acts and avoid the cognitive dissonance and self condemnation that is associated with violating one's personal moral standards (Bandura et al., 1996).

Moral disengagement consists of eight sociocognitive mechanisms which operate at three levels of social processing. The **first level** works by altering the interpretation of an inhumane act. For instance, it may employ moral justification (the behavior is for a worthy cause - e.g. furthering the gang's status), euphemistic language (sanitizing the description of harm - e.g. acts of violence may be described as "gang business"), and advantageous comparisons which involves comparing one's own behavior with that of others considered to be worse (e.g. we only assault - others kill). The **second level** reinterprets inhumane actions by displacement of responsibility on to authority figures for personal behavior (i.e. one's behavior results from authority figures' dictats - so there is no personal responsibility); diffusion of responsibility (responsibility for the harm done is shared by several perpetrators - thus diluting or dispensing with individual blame), and distorting the consequences of harm (by ignoring, minimizing, or disbelieving the harm done to others). The **third level** involves distorting the way the victim is viewed to deny them their victim status via dehumanization tactics (the victim is seen as subhuman and is thus devoid of normal human qualities) or blaming them (they brought it on themselves - they deserved it).

Empirical evidence supports that youth do indeed, set aside their moral standards if by doing so their chosen group will accept them (e.g. Emler & Reicher, 1995). Evidence further shows that street (e.g. Alleyne & Wood, 2010) and those involved in prison gang activity (e.g. Wood, Moir & James, 2009; Wood et al., in press) do indeed set aside their moral standards to engage in inhumane behavior. Research further shows how an ability to morally disengage links to increased levels of violence (e.g. Bandura et al., 1996). Moral disengagement also mediates pathways between impoverished neighborhoods, which are strongly associated with gang membership, (e.g. Hill, Lui & Hawkins, 2001) and antisocial behavior and between low levels of empathy and antisocial behavior (e.g. Hyde, Shaw & Moilanen, 2010). As Hyde et al., observe,

In more modern contexts, urban youth living in impoverished homes and neighborhoods that offer them little hope or opportunity for socially acceptable pathways to success may develop a moral code of behavior that is not bound by mainstream prohibitions against committing antisocial actions, particularly when such actions are associated with the means to obtain financial success (e.g., dealing illicit drugs) or ensuring safety (e.g., joining a gang). (p. 198).

If they are already involved in delinquent behavior then chances are that youth will have already begun to use moral disengagement strategies to justify their delinquency. However, although their pre-gang delinquency may have brought them some gains (e.g. financial) they are also likely to have encountered external moral condemnation (e.g. from parents, teachers etc.). In contrast, once they join a gang their deviant behavior is likely to be positively reinforced, not only from the acquisition of material profit (e.g. from drug sales), but also from the approval of other gang members. Such positive endorsement will additionally further reinforce their commitment to the group (e.g. Esbensen & Huizinga,

1993) and is likely to negate any reduction in their delinquency that others' moral condemnation may have triggered since now it is condoned. Importantly, it is also likely to exacerbate and intensify the moral disengagement process.

Being a gang member may also provide additional scope for using moral disengagement strategies. Gang members, compared to nongang youth, are more likely to be violently victimized, sexually assaulted (males or females), and suffer serious injuries from fighting (e.g. Taylor, Freng, Esbensen & Peterson, 2008). They are also more likely to be victimized by rival gangs (e.g. Sanders, 1994). As such they may feel justified in being involved in violent retaliations against rival gang members. This idea is supported by research which shows that street gang members, compared to nongang youth, use more victim blaming disengagement strategies (e.g. Alleyne & Wood, 2010). Research further shows how peripheral gang members, more than nongang youth, use more displacement of responsibility disengagement tactics to justify their delinquent behavior (e.g. Alleyne & Wood, 2010). This is understandable. In a group with an established hierarchy of membership such as peripheral and core membership, it is feasible that peripheral members, eager to establish their value to the gang, will follow the lead and/or instructions of more established members. In other words, they follow orders - or at least they believe they are doing so (e.g. Alleyne & Wood, 2010). Either way, it seems that being part of a gang is likely to help foster and broaden members' moral disengagement strategies and, as they learn to sideline their moral standards more and more, gang members are able to become more involved in acts of delinquency.

### **Offence supportive cognitions**

Unified theory maintains that gang membership is likely to generate and/or foster pro-aggression cognitions, beliefs and attitudes that underline delinquent behavior. Cognitive

schemas are essentially cognitive structures which people use to screen, encode and evaluate social stimuli (Beck, 1964). They are parts of memory that hold previous knowledge and contain attitudes, beliefs and assumptions about oneself, other people and the world (e.g. Mann & Beech, 2003). They are, in short, categories of information that people create based on their past experiences. Some theorists prefer to think of schema more as implicit theories (ITs) since they maintain that this term more accurately explains the way that people develop theories to explain the world, develop and test hypotheses on which they base predictions about future events (Ward, 2000). ITs therefore bear some similarity to scientific theories inasmuch as people use them to interpret evidence accumulated regarding other people's behaviors desires and motives (Ward, 2000). In short, ITs are conceptually lay theories that "...enable individuals to explain and understand aspects of their social environment, and, therefore, to make predictions about future events." (Ward, 2000; p. 495). ITs are called implicit because they are seldom explicitly expressed by the holders (Ward, 2000) and they function on two main psychological constructs: beliefs and desires (Polaschek, Calvert & Gannon, 2009). Accordingly, beliefs about oneself, the world and other people are the driving force behind subsequent actions that are employed to achieve personal desires.

ITs may be revised if new information suggests that existing theoretical constructs held by the individual are wrong (Polaschek, et al., 2009). However, people are highly motivated to interpret information in a way that is consistent with their ITs, which can be deeply entrenched and resistant to change (Ward, 2000). This makes it more likely that inconsistent incoming information will be re-interpreted until it is consistent with the individual's existing ITs (Polaschek, et al., 2009). To achieve this consistency people may skew or cognitively distort incoming information. For example, research shows how people who hold ITs that others are generally hostile and self-serving are likely to interpret an accidental bump from another person as stemming from malevolent intentions (Epps &

Kendall, 1995). Offending populations, in particular, have been found to hold cognitive distortions (i.e. distorted or deviant beliefs).

Consequently, when a youth becomes a gang member and accepts the gang's norms, strives to achieve status via delinquent acts, acquires the ingroup/outgroup biases associated with their new group membership, then s/he is likely to develop ITs and associated cognitive distortions that support pro-gang, pro-delinquency activities. In addition, the reinforcement that the new gang member receives from peers for acts of aggression on behalf of the gang will probably lead to a positive appraisal of personal aggression. Such personal appraisal will help to foster further cognitive distortions in a pro-aggressive direction, which is then assimilated in to the gang member's memory and corresponding ITs to act as a guide for future behavior.

Research into ITs has mostly been conducted with sexual offenders where the value of this perspective has been amply demonstrated (e.g. Polaschek & Ward, 2002; Ward & Keenan, 1999). However, an IT approach has been used to examine intimate partner violence (e.g. Gilchrist, 2008; Weldon & Gilchrist, 2012; see also Pornari, Dixon & Humphreys, 2013, for a review), firesetting (e.g. Ó Ciardha & Gannon, 2012) and violent offending (e.g. Polaschek, et al., 2009). Although gang affiliation has not been directly examined from an IT perspective, qualitative work highlights that gang members' violence functions on beliefs of traditional male gender values and beliefs associated with aggression (Lopez & Emmer, 2002). Gang violence is also committed in accordance with gang rules, norms and values (Lopez & Emmer, 2002), which suggests that gang members adopt the beliefs and values of the gang as ITs and supports findings that they put what they perceive to be the beliefs and values of the gang before their personal beliefs and values (see also above re commitment). As the authors observed:

In contrast to the vigilante and self-preservation crimes, the individual self-identity was not mentioned or even alluded to in the commission of the aforementioned violent offenses. Instead, the focus was on the gang as a system with its own beliefs, rules, and norms. (Lopez & Emmer, 2002; p. 37).

Taking a grounded theory approach, Polaschek et al., (2009) looked to identify the specific ITs of violent offenders and identified four core ITs that they held. The first, and arguably the most important IT as it underpins several of the others, is normalization of violence. Violent offenders saw violence as an effective form of communication in terms of resolving conflicts, as persuasive tactics and to make others respect you. Consequences of violence for victims – either physical and/or psychological were minimized (see also moral disengagement strategies above) – and so was personal victimization. The second IT is beat or be beaten and includes two subtypes (self-enhancement and self-preservation). The underlying assumption of this IT is the need to strike first in the violence stakes – otherwise others will gain the advantage in what is perceived by the individual as a violent world. The self enhancement subtype may be particularly relevant to gang youth inasmuch as it maintains that violence is necessary in order to achieve and/or maintain status and to demonstrate one's dominance over others. The self-preservation subtype relates to their mistrust of others and how they perceive violence as a necessary response to others who will walk all over them – if they are not violent first. The third IT is I am the law and refers to violent offenders' beliefs that they are superior to others and entitled or even obliged to assault or harm others to discipline them. Violence is seen as necessary to protect others or the social order. It is, the authors contend, a hallmark of vigilantism – where violence is delivered as a response to the perceived harm caused by others. Hence, this IT could also be relevant to gang members – particularly core members' discipline of peripheral members and

retaliatory attacks on other gangs. Gangs have also been known to offer social control to their communities and have been known to “police” neighborhood events even better than the police (Patillo, 1998). The final IT that violent offenders held was I get out of control. This IT refers to problems that violent offenders have with self-control and regulation of their behavior. They may view their behavior as stemming from rage or uncontrollable anger. Links between gang membership and a lack of self-control have been well established in theory (e.g. Gottfredson & Hirschi’s (1990) - general theory of crime) and empirical findings which shows how a lack of self-control is a key predictor of gang membership (e.g. (Esbensen & Osgood, 1999). Research further shows how gang youth use their gang membership as a coping strategy for negative emotions such as anger, frustration, and anxiety (Eitle et al., 2004; Klemp-North, 2007). Recent findings also confirms that gang members suffer from high levels of anxiety disorder and psychosis (Coid et al., 2013) which in turn have been linked to a lack of self-control (e.g. Novaco, 1997).

Although ITs have not been examined directly in terms of gang membership, the above suggests that becoming a gang member is likely to support and help develop a youth’s offense supportive cognitions – or implicit theories. Since research regarding the psychology of gang membership is still in its infancy we cannot yet say whether gang membership is a causal factor in the development of pro-delinquent ITs. However, the evidence above suggests that even if gang membership does not cause pro-delinquent ITs, it is likely to strengthen any that already exist as the youth adopts and assimilates the pro-delinquency gang norms and values.

### **Rumination, displaced aggression and entitativity**

Although it is noted above that gangs may not be particularly cohesive (Klein & Maxson, 2006) research does show that gangs develop an “oppositional culture” where they



set the group in opposition to legitimate authorities such as the police, schools etc. (Moore & Vigil, 1989). Research findings show how street gang membership (Alleyne & Wood, 2010) and involvement in prison gang activity (Wood et al., in press) links strongly to anti-authority attitudes. As gangs are targeted in gang prevention programs leading to persistent contact with authorities this also helps to reinforce their gang identities (e.g. McAra & McVie, 2005; Ralphs, Medina & Aldridge, 2009) and amplifies the oppositional culture (e.g. Klein & Maxson, 2006). In turn, gangs may come to view themselves as victims of oppression who are unfairly victimized (Lien, 2005). This then encourages members to consider themselves as defenders of their group which is being victimized by society. Speaking of how gang members in an Oslo sample perceived their membership and their victimization by society Lien, (2005) notes:

He develops ideas of compassion, love, and sacrifice in relation to his friends, and he (sic) explains his acts through a construction of himself as a victim of society. The victimization point is necessary in order to justify the criminal act. He cannot be blamed, the act is heroic rather than evil, and the victims get what they deserve. (p. 121)

This is even more likely if the transgressors are members of a rival gang since empirical evidence confirms that a significant amount of gang-related violence stems from retributive inter-gang violence (e.g. Klein & Maxson, 1989). What this shows is that gang members do not have to be personally victimized in order to retaliate with acts of violence – since they are obligated to retaliate on behalf of the gang and the victimization of any of its members. In turn, this is likely to add to the reasons why individual gang members' levels of deviance increase when they join a gang. S/he offends as a representative of others as well as for him/herself.

## **Rumination**

There are of course, psychological processes that underpin the development of this heightened level of deviance. The intensity of a provocation by others is positively associated with the process of rumination (Horowitz, 1986). According to response styles theory, (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991) rumination involves an individual thinking repetitively about something that has caused them distress. It can involve consistent thoughts about one's own thoughts and feelings as well as their causes as well as consistent thoughts about the provoking event (e.g. Bushman et al., 2005). Consequently, perceptions that the gang is being victimized are likely to cause members to ruminate on how this makes them feel and also about the provoking event. In short, the individual gang member is likely to 'dwell' on the harm that they perceive another has to their gang and how this makes them feel.

Ordinarily, when an individual is provoked, the negative affect that emanates from that event will dispel after a short period of time (e.g. Bushman et al., 2005). However, rumination can help maintain the negative affect long after the provocation by producing a focus on one's feelings about the event and its causes (e.g. Lyubomirsky & Nolen-Hoeksmea, 1995). Rumination is associated with psychopathologies such as depression, anxiety, binge eating and drinking and self-harm (e.g. Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco & Lyubomirsky, 2008). In such cases the focus of rumination is primarily on the self. However, the focus of rumination can also be externalized via hostile and vengeful ruminative thoughts (e.g. Bandura et al., 1996). As Bandura et al., (1996) note, hostile rumination heightens aggressiveness but people can often ruminate hostilely without acting on their feelings. However, if moral disengagement strategies have freed them from their normal moral constraints (see above), then they will be more likely to respond aggressively to perceived wrongs (Bandura, et al., 1996). As Bandura et al., (1996) note:

Effective moral disengagement creates a sense of social rectitude and self-righteousness that breeds ruminative hostility and retaliatory thoughts for perceived grievances. (p. 366).

Research findings confirm that gang members ruminate more than do other populations – even violent populations. For instance, findings show how compared to nongang youth, gang youth ruminate more (e.g. Vasquez, Osman & Wood, 2012). Research comparing gang members' and other violent men's psychiatric morbidity also highlights the importance of rumination in gang members (Coid et al., 2013). This research showed how even though both violent men and gang members reported holding positive attitudes to violence, gang members reported more frequent violent ruminations and a greater inclination to respond with violence to perceived disrespect than did violent men who were not gang members. Gang members were also more likely to be victims of violence than were violent men. Interestingly, this research further showed how violent ruminations combined with experiences of being violently victimized and their fear of future victimization, explained the links between gang membership and both anxiety disorders and psychosis (Coid et al., 2013).

### **Displaced Aggression**

Although when provoked, an individual may be motivated to retaliate against their transgressor there will be occasions when this is not possible. This may then lead to aggression being directed at another victim. This is known as displaced aggression - aggression that targets either an innocent victim (Dollard et al., 1939), or a target that has not provided sufficient justification for the levels of aggression meted on them (e.g. Pedersen et al., 2000). Displacement targets are likely to occur in situations where, for instance, the original provocateur has left the scene, or is intangible such as a social construct (e.g.

economic hardship), or the provocateur provokes concerns of retaliation that the individual would rather avoid (e.g. the police and prosecution).

Researchers theorize that gang members will be more inclined to engage in displaced aggression (e.g. Vasquez, Lickel & Hennigan, 2010). Their argument is that gang members are more likely to experience adverse events that prevent them from retaliation against the provocateur. For example, their street orientation may mean that gang members have an antagonistic relationship with authority figures, which in turn may foster a strong sense of being victimized (e.g. Lien, 2005). This is even more likely if the authorities employ gang suppression tactics, which findings suggest can lead to an increase in the number of gangs (e.g. Hagedorn, 2008) as gangs commit more crime to defend their group identity (e.g. Ayling, 2011). As Klein and Maxson, (2006) observe, “The war on gangs justifies the warring gang.” (p. 206). Gang members’ deviance is also likely to bring them in to conflict with parents and teachers and lack of parental management (e.g. Thornberry, 2003) or authoritarian parenting styles (e.g. Klein, 1995) may leave a gang member experiencing negative affect from sources against which they are often unable to retaliate (Vasquez et al., 2010). Consequently, another ‘scapegoat’ may be selected as a target onto which the gang member can vent his/her aggression.

The effects of the initial provocation may also exacerbate and amplify the level of displaced aggression. For example, a meta-analysis shows how the more the negative the setting of the interaction between the individual and the target of displaced aggression and the greater the similarity between the original provocateur and the target of displaced aggression, then the more the target will be perceived as deserving of victimization, which in turn serves to increase the magnitude of the displaced aggression (Marcus-Newhall, et al., 2000). This suggests that if gang members have been provoked by rival gang members, then all members of that rival gang are likely to be perceived as similar to the provocateur - and hence justified

displacement targets. Also, the effects of the initial provocation will exacerbate the aggressive response to the displacement target if the provocation occurred in the presence of others (e.g. Vasquez, et al., 2013). This may be due to feelings of humiliation and a motivation to ‘save face’ with others (Vasquez, et al., 2013). In essence, provocation, particularly provocation that occurs in front of others may result in rumination and subsequent retaliation against targets that do little to deserve victimization. As Vasquez et al., (2013) note, “If they stew about a provoking incident and focus on their bad mood, they may in turn lash out against others who provide only the slightest excuse for aggressive retaliation.” (p. 28). In a gang context, many of the provocations that members experience are likely to be in a public arena. Gangs are street oriented groups and their deviance is likely to be committed with other members (e.g. Weerman, et al., 2009). So, the motivation for individual gang members to retaliate against any slight is likely to be heightened by the presence of an audience. In turn, this is likely to exacerbate levels of aggression in gang members.

### **Entitativity**

A further factor that may feed a gang member’s disproportionate response to an innocent target is entitativity. Entitativity refers to the extent to which a group is perceived of as an entity (i.e. it possesses unity and coherence). Campbell (1958) coined the term to differentiate between real groups and collections of individuals. For example, intimate groups such as a family have entitativity, whilst a group of people waiting at a bus stop do not (Lickel et al., 2000). Campbell argued that a group of people could be perceived as having entitativity if they moved together, resembled each other, were close to each other and formed a coherent figure. Building on Campbell’s ideas, researchers have since proposed that there are five antecedents to entitativity: the importance of the group to its members; the similarity of group members; the extent to which members interact with each other; the extent

to which members share common goals; and the extent to which members experience common outcomes (Lickel, et al., 2000). The idea that high similarity results in perceptions that the group is high in entitativity has been confirmed in research findings (e.g. Hamilton, Sherman & Rogers, 2004).

It is easy to see why gangs might be considered as high in entitativity. They share patterns of age (members are primarily adolescent) they are often exclusively male, and they are often ethnically homogeneous (Klein, Weerman & Thornberry, 2006) - although in the U.K. both street (e.g. Mares, 2001) and prison (e.g. Wood, 2006) gangs tend to form along regional lines. In addition, gangs often adopt descriptors that serve as identifiers. For instance they may adopt colors, clothing, argot, tattoos, hand signals, and emblems (Klein et al., 2006) which they use to emphasize their own identity. As a result, such descriptive elements of gang membership may further exacerbate the perceived entitativity of the group, particularly by rival gang members. In turn, their entitativity may be used as justification for selecting any member as a target for displaced aggression that emanates from a previous altercation with another member of that gang. Such a situation is potentially even more likely if it is difficult to identify the provocateur (e.g. in a drive-by shooting). In short, any member of the rival gang will do as a target in terms of vengeance - since they are all the same.

## **Conclusions**

The aim of this chapter was to provide an analysis of the group and individual psychological influences that stem from gang membership. The enduring finding that gang membership increases individuals' levels of deviance but only during gang membership, suggests strongly that gang member youth are not inherently different from other youth. Instead it suggests that gangs exert a unique impact on those who join them - whilst they are members. The theoretical propositions and empirical evidence outlined in this chapter go

some way to explain how this inimitable influence might occur. Social psychologists have robustly demonstrated how group attachment and commitment to a group facilitate an individual's identification with their group and in turn, influence the way that members think and feel about themselves. By subscribing to the group's norms, members may develop more positive esteem - and so too, may the group. As the group continues to exact its implicit authority over members via group process effects, members work to further group goals - and as noted above - gang goals are criminal in nature. Continuing from the theme of group process effects, the chapter then sought to emphasize the importance of individual effects of gang membership by showing how social cognitive processes may contribute to gang members' elevated deviancy. The theoretical propositions and empirical evidence presented was by no means exhaustive and the causal relationship between social cognitions and gang membership still need to be fully established. However, the chapter sought to establish the multitude of social cognitive processes that result from gang membership and in doing so it demonstrated the powerful influence that gangs have on members at an individual level. Members may set aside their moral constraints, develop pro-offending cognitions and via rumination processes, aggress against innocent targets. In short, this chapter highlights the powerful effect that gangs can have on the psychology of members.

So far psychology has given the issue of gang membership little specific attention and so many of the points made in this chapter are speculative. However, this is beginning to change as psychologists embark on developing empirical and theoretical propositions that emphasize the importance of examining the social cognitive processes that underpin gang membership. In many ways gangs, can be conceptualized as a unique collective of groups since they produce negative outcomes (i.e. acts of deviance) whilst providing members with positive and necessary life enhancements (e.g. social support, identity, emotional bonding and financial resources). Consequently it is not difficult to see why youth, particularly youth

who feel marginalized from legitimate institutions such as school, are attracted to gang membership. However, we need to continue to develop research strategies that aim to establish the explicit psychological influence that gangs have on their members - and this is particularly important if we are to develop effective treatment programs to negate those effects. Therefore gang research is vital and a deeper involvement of all relevant disciplines will be critical as we strive to comprehend exactly how gangs influence their members to become particularly deviant.



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