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Gang involvement: Psychological and behavioral characteristics of gang members, peripheral youth and non-gang youth

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Research has noted the existence of a loose and dynamic gang structure. However, the psychological processes that underpin gang membership have only begun to be addressed. This study examined gang members, peripheral youth, and non-gang youth across measures of criminal activity, the importance they attach to status, their levels of moral disengagement, their perceptions of out-group threat, and their attitudes toward authority. Of the seven hundred and ninety eight high school students who participated in this study, 59 were identified as gang members, 75 as peripheral youth and 664 as non-gang youth. Gang members and peripheral youth were more delinquent than non-gang youth overall, however, gang members committed more minor offenses than non-gang youth and peripheral youth committed more violent offenses than non-gang youth. Gang members were more anti-authority than non-gang youth, and both gang and peripheral youth valued social status more than non-gang youth. Gang members were also more likely to blame their victims for their actions and use euphemisms to sanitize their behavior than non-gang youth; whereas peripheral youth were more likely than non-gang youth to displace responsibility onto their superiors. These findings are discussed as they highlight the importance of examining individual differences in the cognitive processes that relate to gang involvement.

Keywords: street gangs, gang involvement, psychology, crime, delinquency

The existence of gangs can no longer be regarded as an urban myth in the UK (Klein, Kerner, Maxson, & Weitekamp, 2001). Metropolitan areas such as Edinburgh (Bradshaw, 2005), Glasgow (Everard, 2006), Manchester (Mares, 2001; Shropshire & McFarquhar, 2002), London, and Birmingham (Shropshire & McFarquhar, 2002) are especially affected by gang-related crime, and several additional cities have reported gang-like activity (Shropshire & McFarquhar, 2002). However, the 'Eurogang paradox', where authorities in European countries use the stereotype of American gangs to inform their definition of a gang (Klein et al., 2001), has stunted the development of empirical research and as a result, the literature on gangs in Europe, and particularly in the UK, has only recently begun to emerge (Hallsworth & Young, 2004). This is unfortunate since research has found overwhelming similarities between European and American gangs (Klein, Weerman, & Thornberry, 2006). As a result, the majority of what is known about gangs comes primarily from research conducted in the US (Klein et al., 2006).

To date, gang research has been primarily criminological and sociological in nature (Bennett & Holloway, 2004; Wood & Alleyne, 2010), and since criminological theories pay scant attention to the social psychological processes involved in joining a gang (Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith, & Tobin, 2003) there is a real need to understand more about the *psychology* of gang involvement (Wood & Alleyne, 2010). To that end, this study compared gang members, peripheral youth and non-gang youth to gain insight into the social-cognitive processes that leave youth vulnerable to the consequences of gang membership.

Before embarking on any examination of gangs we must be clear about what we mean when we use the term 'gang.' There remains a lack of consensus regarding a precise definition and this has constrained the reach of empirical research (Esbensen, Winfree, He, & Taylor, 2001; see Spergel, 1995, for review). However, in Europe, researchers have reached more of an agreement and so for this study we adopted the Eurogang definition: "a gang, or

troublesome youth group, is any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of their group identity" (Weerman et al., 2009).

What do we know about gangs?

Interactional theory (Thornberry, 1987; Thornberry & Krohn, 2001) posits that gang membership results from a reciprocal relationship between the individual and: peer groups, social structures (i.e. poor neighborhood, school and family environments), weakened social bonds, and a learning environment that fosters and reinforces delinquency. This theory can be considered a marriage between two theories. Control Theory argues that people who engage in deviant behavior do so when their bond to society weakens (Hirschi, 1969). However, control theory does not acknowledge the effects of antisocial influences, e.g. delinquent peers, on gang membership (e.g. Esbensen & Weerman, 2005). On the other hand, Social Learning Theory argues that crime is learned through: the development of beliefs that crime is acceptable in some situations; the positive reinforcement of criminal involvement (e.g. approval of friends, financial gains); and the imitation of the criminal behavior of others—especially if they are people the individual values (Akers, 1997). A drawback, for example, is that social learning theory fails to specify how much individuals need to favor crime prior to engaging with like-minded delinquent peers (e.g. gang members) (Akers, 1997). Unlike Control Theory, Social Learning Theory, and others, which take a unidirectional perspective of delinquency involving specific risk factors that *cause* a youth to become delinquent, Interactional Theory provides a more subtle *developmental* explanation of delinquency where societal, learning and delinquency factors all interact and mutually influence one another across an individual's lifespan.

Thus, the aim of Interactional Theory (Thornberry et al., 2003) is to examine the reciprocity of relationships between influential factors during the life course (Hall, Thornberry, & Lizotte, 2006). Although the purpose of this paper is not to test theory,

Interactional Theory provides a constructive framework for exploring these individual, social, and psychological factors and how they relate to gang membership.

Individual factors. Gang members in the US and the UK are overwhelmingly young on entry to the gang with 12 – 18 year old youth being most at risk (Rizzo, 2003; Spergel, 1995); once a member, some continue membership well into their 20s or even older (Bullock & Tilley, 2002; Rizzo, 2003; Shropshire & McFarquhar; 2002; Spergel, 1995). Research has varied on the gender composition of gangs partly because there is difficulty understanding the relationship between gang membership and their actual participation in gang activity (Spergel, 1995). However, it still remains that gangs are predominantly comprised of males (Rizzo, 2003; Bennett & Holloway, 2004). Research into the ethnic composition of gangs has found that some are in fact homogenous (Spergel, 1995; Bullock & Tilley, 2002; Esbensen & Weerman, 2005), while others are heterogenous (Gatti, Tremblay, Vitaro, & McDuff, 2005; Sharp, Aldridge, & Medina, 2006). This inconsistency in the literature supports the notion that gangs reflect the ethnic make-up of the neighborhoods they represent (Bullock & Tilley, 2002). Further, individual risk factors include learning disabilities and mental health issues (Hill, Howell, Hawkins, & Battin-Pearson, 1999).

Social factors. Gang members have been found to come from a background of low socio-economic status (Spergel, 1995; Rizzo, 2003), neighborhoods with existing gangs (Spergel, 1995) and high in juvenile delinquency (Hill, Lui, & Hawkins, 2001). Family factors such as poor parental management (Thornberry et al., 2003; Sharp et al., 2006), familial criminality (Eitle, Gunkel, & van Gundy, 2004; Sharp et al., 2006), and gang-involved family members (Spergel, 1995) provides young people with a home environment that reinforces gang-related and delinquent behavior (Thornberry et al., 2003). Also, delinquent peers and pressure from these peers increase the likelihood of antisocial behavior (e.g. the Confluence Model – Dishion, Patterson, & Griesler, 1994; Monahan, Steinberg, & Cauffman, 2009) and gang

membership (Thornberry et al., 2003; Esbensen & Weerman, 2005; Sharp et al., 2006). However, consistent with the delinquency literature (e.g. Chung & Steinberg, 2006), no single factor can fully explain gang membership.

Gangs also display a proclivity for criminal activity. Interactional theory (Thornberry, 1987; Thornberry & Krohn, 2001) further explains gang membership as a result from *selection* where gangs select and recruit members who are already delinquent; from *facilitation* where gangs provide opportunities for delinquency to youth who were not delinquent beforehand (Gatti et al., 2005; Gordon, Lahey, Kawai, Loeber-Stouthamer, & Farrington, 2004; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, & Chard-Wierschem, 1993), and *enhancement* where gang members are recruited from a population of high-risk youth who, as gang members, become more delinquent (Gatti et al., 2005; Thornberry et al., 1993). Research in the UK shows that gang crimes include robbery, drug trafficking, weapons possession (Bennett & Holloway, 2004) and the use of firearms to settle even minor disputes (e.g. Bullock & Tilley, 2008).

Psychological factors. Low self-esteem has a significant relationship with delinquency, antisocial behavior, and aggression, elements characteristic of gang membership (Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2005). Some research supports the premise that youth with less confidence and self-esteem, and weak bonds with a prosocial environment and network (i.e., schools and family) are more likely to look towards gangs than youth who are more confident (Dukes, Martinez, & Stein, 1997). Furthermore, self-esteem has a dynamic relationship with gang membership. It plays a central role in whether a young person joins a gang, participates as a member, and decides to leave the gang (Dukes et al., 1997). To illustrate, a young person with low self-esteem could look towards a gang for support and consequently as the group esteem goes up (due to success in delinquent and antisocial activities), that individual's esteem parallels. However, if ever a gang member

wants to leave the gang, it would require a high self-esteem in order to resist the pressure from the gang.

Additional psychological constructs that have been linked with gang membership and its related criminal behavior include: impulsivity, risk-seeking, and peer pressure (Esbensen et al., 2001; Esbensen & Weerman, 2005). Also, gang members cope with their behavior by neutralizing the negative consequences of their actions (Esbensen & Weerman, 2005; Esbensen, Peterson, Taylor, & Freng, 2009), and, most disturbingly, they are guilt-free of their criminal behavior (Esbensen et al., 2001; Esbensen et al., 2009).

What we do not know about gangs

To date, we know very little about the psychological processes that Thornberry and colleagues (2003) discuss as facilitators of gang membership. In their research they discuss delinquent beliefs (defined as the belief that it is acceptable to be delinquent) as causes, correlates, and consequences of delinquent behavior and gang membership. These beliefs, similar to self-esteem, play a dynamic role developmentally. They have been found to interact reciprocally with associations with delinquent peers and delinquent behavior (Thornberry, Lizotte, Krohn, Farnworth, & Jang, 1994). However, we argue that these beliefs need further examination as they are more resistant to intervention (Hollin, Browne, & Palmer, 2002).

For example, the temptation to join a gang may be because gangs offer youth the potential to gain respect and status (Anderson, 1999; Klein & Maxson, 2006). Knox (1994) described gangs as exerting two types of social power that attract youth: coercive power – the threat or actual use of force and violence; and the power to pay, buy, impress, and to delegate status and rank to its members. As such, gangs reflect universal needs among young people for status, identity and companionship (Klein, 1995; Klein & Maxson, 2006). Young boys look up to gang members, mimic them, and aspire to gang membership (Hughes & Short,

2005) and gang films depicting characters rewarded for gang-like behaviors act as a blueprint for young aspiring gang members (Przemieniecki, 2005). So, it is feasible that a youth who sees *status as important* may be tempted into gangs. We already know that offenders who see status as important are more inclined to bully (South & Wood, 2006) and bullying is associated with gang membership (Wood, Moir, & James, 2009), so it is reasonable to expect that gang members will give status more importance than will non-gang youth.

However, youth may experience internal moral conflict when they discover benefits requiring immoral behavior, since harmful behavior is likely to conflict with their existing moral standards. So, traditionally, Sykes and Matza (1957) argued that any dissonance resulting from feelings of guilt and shame following involvement in harmful behavior (e.g. gang crime) can be *neutralized* by employing cognitive techniques (i.e. denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of the victim, condemnation of the condemners, and appeal to higher loyalties). There is evidence that gang members do, in fact, use neutralization techniques (Esbensen & Weerman, 2005), however, it is unclear which specific strategies they employ. Bandura has developed Sykes and Matza's (1957) concepts by identifying moral *disengagement strategies*, i.e. the "…cognitive restructuring of inhumane conduct into benign or worthy behavior" (Bandura, 2002, p. 101). In short, moral disengagement is a socio-cognitive process through which people *rationalize* and *justify* harmful acts against others. There are eight mechanisms by which moral self-sanctions may be selectively disengaged and they operate at three levels of social processing. The first level serves to reinterpret the nature of the inhumane act by using *moral justification* (serves a worthy purpose), *euphemistic language* (sanitizing the language describing the behavior e.g. criminal acts may be described as 'business') and *advantageous comparisons* (comparing personal behavior favorably to acts that are considered to be worse). The second level reinterprets the inhumane act using *displacement of responsibility* ('….stemming from the

dictates of authorities rather than being personally responsible……' (Bandura, 2002, p. 106)), *diffusion of responsibility* (the more people involved in the harm done, the less the person considers themselves as blameworthy), and *distortion of the consequences* (ignoring, minimizing, or disbelieving the harm done). The third level involves distorting information concerning the victim by *dehumanizing* (viewing victim as sub-human, devoid of normal human qualities) or *blaming* them (their behavior means they deserve the harm they experience) in an effort to deny them victim status.

Research shows that youth do indeed, set aside their moral standards if by doing so they will be accepted by a chosen group (Emler & Reicher, 1995). And research shows a relationship between moral disengagers and violent behavior (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). As such, social cognitive processes such as moral disengagement may help explain the process of *how* youth set aside their existing moral standards in favor of the rewards gang membership offers. Also, if there are differences between types of gang members and peripheral youth and their use of moral disengagement strategies, there may be evidence of the way in which gang cognitions facilitate joining a gang and engaging in gang-related crime.

We also know from research findings that gang members hold more *negative attitudes to authority* (Kakar, 2005) such as the police (Lurigio, Flexon, & Greenleaf, 2008) and if youth are primed in their gang identities, their anti-authority attitudes increase (Khoo & Oakes, 2000). In addition, persistent contact with authority may, in fact, reinforce gang identities (McAra & McVie, 2005; Ralphs, Medina, & Aldridge, 2009) exemplifying the reciprocity interactional theory denotes. So, we might expect youth involved in gangs, either as gang members or peripheral youth, to hold more negative attitudes to authority than non-gang youth.

Previous literature has identified some gang members as 'reluctant gangsters' where neighborhoods peppered with gangs and crime make youth fearful of victimization and lead to perceptions that their world is a dangerous place (Pitts, 2007). Such threat can play multiple roles within and between gangs. Threat from neighborhood gangs can push a group of youths towards developing into a gang, it can also reinforce the collective identity and group cohesion, and lastly, it can be responsible for an increase in further gang violence (Decker, 1996; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996). Therefore, it might also be expected that gang members experience *threat* from other groups of youths, and thus see gang membership as offering them protection. As Klein, (1995) observes: ".....in the gang there is protection from attack ..... It provides what he has not obtained from his family, in school, or elsewhere in his community" (p.78). As such youth who become involved in gangs may be those who experience most threat from others.

Our study

Comparisons are all too rare in the gang literature (Klein, 2006) and so by comparing gang with non-gang youth this study provides us with an opportunity to examine some of the psychological processes that differentiate gang members from non-gang youth. In addition, by comparing varying levels of gang involvement we can begin to pinpoint some of the unique or shared psychological characteristics at each level (Decker & Curry, 2000). Since it is not necessary to be a full gang member in order to experience the effects of gang membership (Curry, Decker, & Egley, Jr., 2002), these comparisons will help us to understand more about the differences between youth who are not gang involved, those who are not, as yet, fully committed to gang membership, and those who are fully fledged members. This allows us to gain a greater understanding of the processes involved in the development of gang membership and also highlights ways to circumvent these processes, which is an area lacking in existing research (Klein & Maxson, 2006). Also, if we could

identify the psychological factors that underlie a tendency to join or form a gang then we may be able to identify at risk youth, and add to a more comprehensive theory of gang development (see Wood & Alleyne, 2010). And since the most successful intervention programs targeting delinquency address social, cognitive, and behavioral processes (Hollin et al., 2002), these psychological factors could be used to construct more successful interventions to reduce gang membership.

Our approach includes an examination of different levels of gang involvement. Researchers acknowledge a loose and fluid hierarchy within and around the gang, consisting of gang members and youth who exist along the gang's periphery (Stelfox, 1998; Esbensen et al., 2001; Curry et al., 2002). For example, Curry and colleagues (2002) examined the differences in delinquency for young people with no gang involvement, gang involvement but not members, and gang members. They found that the fluid and gradual process of increasing gang involvement had significant effects on delinquency and although they could not speak directly from a developmental perspective, their findings highlight the potential for a developmental trajectory of gang involvement. Previous research has labeled these 'gang-involved non-members' as peripheral, fringe, and/or wannabes (Spergel, 1995). For the purpose of this study, levels of involvement were defined and labeled as follows: gang members – those who fit the aforementioned Eurogang definition; peripheral youth – those who do not identify themselves as gang members but may participate in gang-related crime and activity; and non-gang youth – those who do not identify themselves as gang members and do not engage in any form of gang related crime and activity. When examining the effects gang membership has on delinquency in conjunction with the extent of involvement with the gang, this may highlight the processes that facilitate gang involvement (Thornberry et al., 2003).

Our expectations were that gang members and peripheral youth would commit more overall delinquency, and specifically minor offenses, property offenses, and crimes that harm people, than non-gang youth. We also expected that gang members and peripheral youth, when compared to non-gang youth, would see status as more important, perceive more threat from others, have higher levels of moral disengagement, and possess higher levels of anti-authority attitudes.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited from five London schools. The mean age of the sample was 14.3 years (*SD* = 1.74, range = 12-18) with 566 boys (71%) and 231 girls (29%). A large proportion of the sample reported that both parents were born in the UK (50%), 14% reported that one parent was UK-born and the other was not, and 36% reported that both parents were immigrants to the UK (see table 1). A total of 1041 questionnaires were returned of which 798 (77%) were used for analyses. The remainder were discarded due to lack of, or incorrect completion of questionnaire items. The inclusion criterion was that participants were aged between 12 and 18 years as this age group has been identified as most at risk for gang membership (Spergel, 1995; Rizzo, 2003). For participants who were 12-16 years old, consent was provided 'in loco parentis' by either their teachers, head teachers, or deputy head teachers (the schools viewed parental consent as unnecessary as long as all ethical stipulations were abided by, i.e., voluntary participation, withdrawal opportunities, and research information provided upon request). This not only allowed for our very high participation rate of 77% (Esbensen and colleagues (2008) support a threshold of 70%), but also the inclusion of a more representative sample in light of the existing biases (e.g. students who were ill, tardy, or truant) associated with sampling in schools (see Esbensen et al., 2008, for review). The older participants (17-18 years old) provided their own consent.

INSERT TABLE ONE ABOUT HERE

Measures

The youth survey: Eurogang program of research (Weerman et al., 2009). This is a comprehensive instrument consisting of 89 items including information on demographic characteristics such as age, gender, and ethnic background (coded as 1 = UK, 2 = Mixed, 3 = Other). Ethnic background was measured as follows: UK – both parents were born in the UK; Mixed – one parent was born in the UK, the other parent was born outside the UK; Other – both parents were born outside the UK. This instrument is also designed to identify those who do and do not belong to a gang according to the Eurogang definition and is useful in highlighting risk and protective factors for gang membership.

Gang membership. Group affiliations were first assessed: e.g. "In addition to any such formal groups, some people have a certain group of friends that they spend time with, doing things together or just hanging out. Do you have a group of friends like that?" Participants who responded "yes" were then asked questions assessing gang membership. According to the Eurogang definition's four components the following were measured: youthfulness – i.e., all members of the group were under the age of 25; durability – the group had been together for more than three months; street-orientation – responding "yes" to the item "Does this group spend a lot of time together in public places like the park, the street, shopping areas, or the neighborhood?"; group criminality as an integral part of the group identity – responding "yes" to the items "Is doing illegal things accepted by or okay for your group?" and "Do people in your group actually do illegal things together?". Peripheral youth (n = 75) were identified by a two-cluster analysis of the remaining participants' responses to their group's durability, street orientation, and criminal identity. This analysis used a k-means algorithm where each case was assigned to the cluster for which its distance to the cluster mean was

smallest (Norusis, 2009). The result of the analysis being two groups with the most similar responses, i.e. the non-gang group had low group durability, were not street-oriented, and little to no criminal identity; the peripheral group had been together longer, were street-oriented, and were more likely to have a criminal identity.

Delinquency. The delinquency measure was divided into three sub-groups in line with Esbensen and Weerman's (2005) previous work. All responses were assessed using a 5-point Likert-type scale: "never", "once or twice", "3-5 times", "6-10 times", and "more than 10 times". *Minor offending* consisted of two items: "During the past 6 months, how often have you avoided paying for something such as movies, bus or underground rides" and "purposely damaged or destroyed property that did not belong to you." *Property offending* consisted of four items: e.g. "stolen or tried to steal something worth less than £50" and "stolen or tried to steal a motor vehicle." *Crimes against person* consisted of three items: e.g. "hit someone with the idea of hurting them" and "attacked someone with a weapon." *Overall delinquency* consisted of 16 items including all of the above with additional items: e.g. "carried a hidden weapon for protection" and "sold illegal drugs" (see table 2 for full list).

Perception of out-group threat. The perception of out-group threat was measured by one item that was created by the authors: "How much do you feel threatened by other groups of youths?" Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from "not at all" to "very much".

Social status scale (South & Wood, 2006). South and Wood's (2006) 18-item scale measures perceptions of the importance of having status. Participants responded to a Likert-type scale with five options for each item ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. The items included various scenarios regarding respect, e.g., "At school students respect people who can fight," "At school good looking people are popular," and "At school if people pick on the 'nerds' they get respect from other students" (South & Wood, 2006).

Mechanisms of moral disengagement scale (Bandura et al., 1996). Bandura and colleagues' (1996) scale consists of 32 items assessing agreement or disagreement with statements regarding moral disengagement strategies. Four statements assess each of the eight mechanisms: moral justification, euphemistic language, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, distorting consequences, attribution of blame, and dehumanization of victims. The value of this scale lies not only in whether it can assess if people are willing to set aside their moral standards in order to achieve a desired outcome, but also in its ability to identify specific cognitive strategies used to do so.

Attitude toward formal authority scale (Reicher & Emler, 1985). Reicher and Emler's (1985) Attitude to Formal Authority Scale assesses youth attitudes towards authority figures such as school officials and the police. We used the 17 items discussed in Reicher and Emler's (1985) publication and responses were assessed using a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree' on statements regarding attitudes toward various encounters with authority.

Procedure

First, this study was approved by the School of Psychology Ethics Committee. All students in each school who met the inclusion criterion (i.e. were between the ages of 12 and 18) were asked to participate in this study. Questionnaires were administered in a classroom following a full verbal briefing regarding the purpose of the research. However, to avoid response bias participants were not told that the research was evaluating gang membership. Instead they were told that the questionnaire was evaluating the nature of their friendship groups. All participants were told that their responses were confidential and would remain anonymous and that their responses would have a code which would be given to them on their debrief sheet so that if they chose to withdraw, their data could be identified and

destroyed. They were also told that their participation was voluntary, which meant they could leave the study at any time without penalty. Following this briefing, participants were given the opportunity to leave the study if they wished to do so. Questionnaires took approximately 60 minutes to complete after which participants were debriefed verbally and provided with a debriefing sheet which reiterated the purpose of the study, provided information on how to withdraw their data if they chose to do so and offered the researchers' contact details should they have further questions.

Results

Data were entered into SPSS where analyses were conducted using a $p < 0.05$ level of significance. Reliability analyses were conducted on each scale except for the variable *out-group threat* because it was only one item. The analyses confirmed that all scales had a reasonable – high internal consistency: minor offending (Esbensen & Weerman, 2005), $\alpha = 0.45$; property offending (Esbensen & Weerman, 2005), $\alpha = 0.61$; crimes against the person (Esbensen & Weerman, 2005), $\alpha = 0.42$; overall delinquency (Esbensen & Weerman, 2005), $\alpha = 0.82$; the Importance of Social Status Scale (South & Wood, 2006), $\alpha = 0.91$; the Mechanisms for Moral Disengagement scale (Bandura et al., 1996), $\alpha = 0.91$; and the Attitude toward Formal Authority (Reicher & Emler, 1985), $\alpha = 0.85$.

Membership

Of the 798 participants, 59 (7%) were identified as gang members, 75 (9%) were identified as peripheral youth, and 664 (83%) were identified as non-gang youth.

Demographic characteristics

Using a oneway ANOVA, we found significant age differences between groups ($F(2, 795) = 13.22$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.03$). Bonferroni post-hoc analysis revealed that gang members ($M = 15.37$, $SD = 1.50$) were older than peripheral youth ($M = 14.43$, $SD = 1.68$, $p < 0.01$) and non-gang youth ($M = 14.18$, $SD = 1.74$, $p < 0.001$). However, there were no

significant differences between peripheral and non-gang youth ($p = 0.74$). Also, there were no gender ($F(2, 795) = 1.71$, $p = 0.18$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.004$) or ethnic ($F(2, 795) = 0.31$, $p = 0.73$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.001$) differences across levels of involvement.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Criminal activity

Table 2 shows the prevalence of gang members, peripheral youth, and non-gang youth who reported committing each type of delinquency at least once in the past six months. As discussed previously, individual scores were summed to provide totals for minor offending (*range* = 2-10), property offending (*range* = 4-20), crimes against the person (*range* = 3-15), and overall delinquency (*range* = 16-80). We conducted a MANCOVA to see whether the different offending measures varied as a function of gang involvment (gang, peripheral, and non-gang) after adjusting for any age, gender, and ethnicity effects. Preliminary analyses confirmed that the assumption of homogeneity of regression slopes was not violated. After the adjustments for the covariates, minor offending ($F(2, 792) = 3.18$, $p < 0.05$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.01$), crimes against the person ($F(2, 792) = 3.97$, $p < 0.05$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.01$), and overall delinquency ($F(2, 792) = 6.10$, $p < 0.01$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.02$) had significant effects on gang involvement; property offending ($F(2, 792) = 1.01$, $p = 0.36$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.003$) did not have an effect on gang involvement (see table 3 for adjusted means). Follow-up tests were conducted to evaluate pairwise differences among the adjusted means for minor offending, crimes against the person, and overall delinquency. The LSD posthoc analysis showed that gang members scored higher on minor offending ($p < 0.05$) and overall delinquency ($p < 0.01$) than non-gang youth. The results also showed that peripheral youth scored significantly

higher than non-gang youth on the crimes against the person measure ($p < 0.05$) and overall delinquency ($p < 0.05$).

INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Psychological characteristics

We conducted a second MANCOVA to see whether the psychological measures (attitudes toward authority, perceived importance of social status, perceptions of outgroup threat, and moral disengagement) varied as a function of gang involvment after adjusting for any age, gender, and ethnicity effects. Preliminary analyses confirmed that the assumption of homogeneity of regression slopes was not violated. After the adjustments for the covariates, anti-authority attitudes ($F(2, 793) = 3.00$, $p < 0.05$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.01$), and perceived importance of social status ($F(2, 793) = 5.26$, $p < 0.01$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.01$) had significant effects on gang involvement; moral disengagement ($F(2, 793) = 2.56$, $p = 0.08$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.01$) and perceptions of outgroup threat ($F(2, 793) = 0.47$, $p = 0.63$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.001$) did not have an effect on gang involvement (see table 4 for adjusted means). Follow-up tests were conducted to evaluate pairwise differences among the adjusted means for attitudes toward authority and perceived importance of social status. The LSD posthoc analysis showed that gang youth scored significantly higher on both anti-authority attitudes ($p < 0.05$) and the perceived importance of social status ($p < 0.01$) than non-gang youth. The results also showed that peripheral youth perceived social status as more important than non-gang youth ($p < 0.05$).

INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

We conducted a third MANCOVA to see whether the moral disengagement strategies (moral justification, euphemistic labelling, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, distortion of consequences, attribution of blame, and dehumanization) varied as a function of gang involvment after adjusting for any age, gender, and ethnicity effects. Preliminary analyses confirmed that the assumption of homogeneity of regression slopes was not violated. After the adjustments for the covariates, euphemistic language ($F(2, 793) = 3.71$, $p < 0.05$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.01$), displacement of responsibility ($F(2, 793) = 3.05$, $p < 0.05$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.01$), and attribution of blame ($F(2, 793) = 4.28$, $p < 0.05$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.01$) had significant effects on gang involvement; moral justification ($F(2, 793) = 2.08$, $p = 0.13$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.01$), advantageous comparison ($F(2, 793) = 0.85$, $p = 0.43$, partial $\eta^2 < 0.01$), diffusion of responsibility ($F(2, 793) = 0.32$, $p = 0.73$, partial $\eta^2 < 0.01$), distortion of consequences ($F(2, 793) = 1.32$, $p = 0.27$, partial $\eta^2 < 0.01$), and dehumanization ($F(2, 793) = 0.97$, $p = 0.38$, partial $\eta^2 < 0.01$) did not have an effect on gang involvement (see table 5 for adjusted means). Follow-up tests were conducted to evaluate pairwise differences among the adjusted means for euphemistic labelling, displacement of responsibility, and attribution of blame. The LSD posthoc analysis showed that gang members scored higher on euphemistic labeling ($p < 0.05$) and attributions of blame (blaming the victim) ($p < 0.01$) than non-gang youth. The results also showed that peripheral youth displaced responsibility more than non-gang youth ($p < 0.05$).

INSERT TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE

Discussion

The aim of this study was to identify some of the psychological factors that underpin gang membership and differentiate between levels of involvement. Our results support

previous research findings that there is fluidity to young people's involvement in gangs exemplified especially by the nature of peripheral youth's attitudes and behaviors (e.g. Spergel, 1995; Stelfox, 1998). We also found significant age differences between gang members and non-gang youth, i.e. gang members were older than non-gang youth; peripheral youth did not differ from either gang or non-gang youth, which suggests a developmental process involved in gang membership. There were not, however, any differences in gender and ethnicity between the three groups, which suggests that similar to previous literature, girls are becoming more gang involved (e.g. Esbensen, Deschenes, & Winfree, Jr., 1999) and the ethnic composition of a gang is representative of its community (Bullock & Tilley, 2002).

Our expectation that both gang members and peripheral youth would commit more overall crime than non-gang youth was upheld. In addition, we found that gang members committed more minor offenses than non-gang youth, and peripheral youth committed more crimes against people than non-gang youth. Parallel to previous research was the finding that property offending did not differ between all three groups (Battin, Hill, Abbott, Catalano, & Hawkins, 1998; Tita & Ridgeway, 2007) adding further support to the facilitation effect gangs have on violent but not property offending. We also found that gang members were more anti-authority than non-gang youth and that both gang and peripheral youth saw social status as more important than non-gang youth. Although moral disengagement as a whole did not have a significant main effect, when we examined the individual strategies we found that gang members used more euphemisms and blamed their victims more than non-gang youth; whilst peripheral youth displaced the responsibility for their actions more than non-gang youth.

Although our data is cross-sectional, there are some interesting inferences to be made. The age difference between gang members and their nongang counterparts (peripheral youth and non-gang youth) suggest that there may be an age-related developmental trajectory

similar to previous findings (e.g. Decker & Van Winkle, 1996). This finding also adds support to Thornberry et al.'s (2003) developmental approach to gang membership, since the roles and responsibilities within a gang become more defined with age (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996). However, due to the cross-sectional design, we cannot say for certain whether peripheral youth will in fact develop into full blown members, or whether they will resist the gang in favor of a more pro-social lifestyle.

Compared to non-gang youth, peripheral youth were more likely to be involved in violent offending whilst gang members did not differ from either peripheral youth or non-gang youth. This finding counters Curry et al.'s (2002) previous finding that gang members were more violent than peripheral youth. However, the Curry et al. (2002) criteria for peripheral membership were based on fewer decisive factors and could have resulted in the inclusion of little to non-involved youth. Conversely our peripheral youth were identified from more precise criteria which would have limited the peripheral group to more highly involved youth who were not gang members.

Both gang members and peripheral youth valued social status more than non-gang members. These findings suggest that the acquisition of status equal to that of gang members may be the motivation that underlies peripheral youths' involvement in gang activity. And because they aspire to gang membership they may feel a need to *prove* themselves to the gang by mimicking what they perceive as acceptable gang behavior (Hughes & Short, 2005; Przemieniecki, 2005). Gang members, on the other hand, do not need to engage in as much violence since they can delegate in the fashion that their status permits.

Gang members held more anti-authority attitudes than non-gang youth. This could be attributed to the experience gang members have engaging with authority figures such as the police. And if this contact is negative, as it is likely to be, then this may well feed gang youths' anti-authority attitudes. Ironically, as mentioned earlier, it is thought that such

negative contact simply serves to reinforce gang identities (Khoo & Oakes, 2000; McAra & McVie, 2005; Ralphs et al., 2009). Also, since moral disengagement on its own did not have an effect on gang involvement, anti-authority attitudes may serve as a justification for gang membership, perhaps serving as a cognitive strategy to rationalize gang involvement. To put in perspective, our findings may result from the selection process posited by Interactional Theory (Thornberry, 1987; Thornberry & Krohn, 2001) where gangs select and recruit previously delinquent youth and thus end up with members who have *already* set aside their moral standards, which enables them to become even more involved in delinquent activity. Our data cannot speak to this, but this is certainly testable in future work.

Previous findings have shown how once a collective identity has been formed even the mere awareness of an out-group (possibly a rival gang) is sufficient to motivate the group to defend its reputation (Emler & Reicher, 1995; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1982). However, perceptions of out-group threat did not appear to have a significant relationship with gang involvement. It could be that threat could have a dynamic relationship with gang involvement (similar to self-esteem). Even though we might expect gang members to perceive higher outgroup threat due to the increased risk of victimization gang members face (Decker, 1996; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996), it could be that the protection the gang offers ameliorates the perception of threat. In short, gang members feel protected by their membership and do not perceive other groups as a threat.

Further examination of each of the specific moral disengagement strategies provides a clearer idea of precisely how gang members view/justify their behavior. Gang members, significantly more than non-gang youth, sanitize their language using *euphemisms.* This could be a mechanism they use to cope with the extremity of gang violence. Since peripheral youth did not score as highly as gang members on this subscale, it could also be argued that this is part and parcel of the developmental processes that underlie gaining membership into

the gang. Peripheral youth, more than non-gang youth, *displace the responsibility* of their actions onto others. This finding, in conjunction with peripheral youths' violent offending suggests that they think they are fulfilling orders passed down from ranking gang members. This provides support of an implicit (or maybe an explicit) understanding of gang roles; and adds further support to Thornberry et al.'s (2003) developmental perspective. If we consider these findings in terms of the age differences mentioned previously, it adds further support to the idea that gang membership functions on a developmental process where, as noted above, membership roles are framed by gang member age (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996). Lastly, gang members are more likely than non-gang youth to *blame their victims* for their behavior. Arguably, if their victims are rival gang members, they justify their offending behavior and the behavior of their gang as an act of justified retaliation. However, our findings cannot identify the profile of gang victims and so we cannot be sure as to why gang members take this view of their victims.

Our results also showed no significant effects for *moral justification* (the end justifies the means), *diffusion of responsibility* (the more people involved in the harm done, the less I can be blamed), *advantageous comparisons* (comparing personal behavior favorably to acts that are considered to be worse), *dehumanization* (victims are sub-human, devoid of normal human qualities), and *distortion of consequences* (ignoring, minimizing, or disbelieving the harm done). These findings suggest that gang members and peripheral youth are fully aware of the consequences of their actions. That is, gang members, in particular, take responsibility for their actions rather than diffusing it among their gang peers. Perhaps this results from their individual identity merging with the collective identity of the gang (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1982); i.e. they see themselves more as a collective than a group of individuals and this collective is marked by an identity which includes a group language (i.e. euphemisms) and an ingroup/outgroup distinction where it is acceptable to blame outgroup

members but not ingroup members. Future research could explore this concept further. Nonetheless, our findings indicate that gang members and peripheral youth make little attempt to disregard or minimize the consequences of their actions and for the most part they seem to accept responsibility for the actions they take. This is particularly disturbing when considered in terms of their violent behavior.

Even though the prevalence of gang members (7%) was marginally high for a British context, it was still in range with previous literature (e.g., 6%, Sharp et al., 2006; 4% - current members, 11% - past members, Bennett & Holloway, 2004). However, this discrepancy may be accounted for by the difference in definition. Sharp and colleagues (2006) may have yielded a lower proportion because they altered the criteria. That is, instead of criminality as part of the group's identity, they included a self-report measure of group criminal activity which may have yielded socially desirable responding. Also, they included two additional criteria: the group consists of three or more youth (including themselves) and the group has at least one structural feature (Sharp et al., 2006). In contrast, our measurement of membership followed the original four Eurogang criteria: youthfulness, durability, street-orientation, and criminal identity (Weerman et al., 2009). However, we do acknowledge that Sharp et al.'s (2006) use of this definition yielded a prevalence of 3%. An explanation for the difference, however disturbing, could be that youth gangs in London, where we conducted this study, are on the rise.

Although the proportion of female gang members in our study is relatively high (36%), this finding is within range of past literature. For example, Moore and Hagedorn (2001) reported that the proportion of self-identified female gang members ranged from 8-38%, whilst other studies have shown females can comprise up to 46% of gang members (e.g. Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993). Previous literature has also shown that the proportion of female gang participation has been difficult to measure due to, in most cases, the nature of their

involvement (Spergel, 1995; Bennett & Holloway, 2004). For example, police reports suggest females typically do not commit 'typical' gang crimes (Spergel, 1995), therefore, studies based on police surveys may be biased towards those who only commit gang crimes. One explanation for this could be the finding that the female gang role is traditionally subservient and their recruitment is partly (if not wholly) for their income potential as sex workers (Thornberry et al., 2003). In this way, police data may include a smaller representation of females as their crimes, i.e., prostitution, may not be categorised as gang-related. Self-reports, on the other hand, produce a higher prevalence for gang membership amongst females (Bennett & Holloway, 2004) and since we used self report methods, this may also account for our findings of comparatively high levels of female gang membership.

The fact that our study shows the prevalence of girl gang members (9%) to be higher than the prevalence of boy gang members (7%) may also reflect a developmental trend. For instance, previous literature shows that females age–in and age-out of gangs earlier than do males (Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993) and since our age range was 12-18 years we may have captured this effect. It may also be that gang members at the upper end of the age range (and hence more likely to be male) were less likely to be still at school. Alternatively our findings may reflect a geographical developmental trend. It may be that as gangs continue to develop in London, females feel more threatened. As such they may become more involved in gangs either because their friends have done so and/or because they feel they need protection from the escalating number of gangs in their area. This is an idea that future work could examine more specifically.

There are some limitations with this study. The sampling of high school students was burdened with the standard vagaries of such a procedure. The sample excludes students who were ill, tardy, or truant. This could result in an under-representation of the target gang member population considering that gang youths are prone to truancy (Young, Fitzgerald,

Hallsworth, & Joseph, 2007). On the other hand, even though the proportion of gang members is within range of previous research, we must acknowledge the seriousness of the current findings. It seems that gang membership is more prevalent in London than previously reported. Another limitation is that participants completed their questionnaires in a classroom setting, which may have affected their responses. However, since the collection of data was overseen by the researchers and no interference was observed we can only assume that responses were genuine. The data collected on ethnic backgrounds do not tell us how long the participants lived in the UK (i.e. if they were born, raised, or newly immigrated to the UK). This limits our ability to assess the full impact of ethnicity and whether growing up within or outside the UK has an effect on gang involvement. However, the UK literature has shown that gangs develop more in terms of regional lines than ethnicity (Bullock & Tilley, 2002), and this has been reflected in prisoners' group formation and involvement in gang-related activity (Wood, 2006). Furthermore, this cross-section does not allow us to identify causal directionality; however, it does permit us to make educated inferences stemmed from previous research. Lastly, the findings may have been biased by common method variance due to the data solely collected via self-reports. However, for the purpose of assessing the respondents' perceptual and experiential constructs, not to mention the sensitive nature of some of the items, self-report was deemed to be the most fruitful method (see Chan, 2009). For example, this allowed us to assess gang membership implicitly whereby participants were not asked to self-nominate themselves as gang members, thus avoiding any definitional issues.

Clearly more research examining the psychological processes behind gang formation and gang-related crime is necessary before we can reach any meaningful conclusions regarding the motivations for gang membership, develop theory (see also Wood & Alleyne, 2010) and devise appropriate interventions. We also need to understand more about how gang

membership develops across time and the factors that contribute to what appears to be, at least from the current findings, a developmental process. Such understanding would contribute significantly to the development of gang theory and hence future research.

Conducting longitudinal research would be the most informative method for examining gangs since it would help to clarify the developmental processes involved in gang membership. However, further cross-sectional snapshots would add to our understanding of the cognitive processes that underlie young people's involvement in gang and criminal activity and help to devise interventions to target gang involved youth. The most successful intervention programs targeting delinquency address social, cognitive, and behavioral processes (Hollin, et. al, 2002). However, as yet, no current gang prevention programs include cognitive-behavioral interventions (Fisher, Gardner, & Montgomery, 2008). Our study shows that socio-cognitive processes deserve more consideration than they currently receive in the development of interventions to tackle gang activity. Future research also needs to consider the differences and similarities between different levels of gang membership.

The incorporation of the psychological processes that delineate non-gang youth, peripheral youth and gang members expands previous research and highlights the importance of examining individual differences in the cognitive processes that relate to gang membership. We are still a long way from developing the interventions needed to address gang membership. However, our findings show that by identifying cognitive processes associated with gang membership there is potential for developing interventions to address youth interest in gangs *before* they develop into fully fledged members.

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Table 1

Demographic characteristics of the total sample, non-gang youth, peripheral youth, and gang members

Demographic characteristics	Total	Non-gang	Peripheral	Gang
Sample size (%)	798	664 (83)	75 (9)	59 (7)
Mean age	14.30	14.18	14.43	15.37
Sex(%)				
Male	566 (71)	469 (71)	59 (79)	38 (64)
Female	232 (29)	195 (29)	16 (21)	21 (36)
Ethnicity (%)				
UK	395 (50)	325 (49)	40 (53)	30 (51)
Mixed	112 (14)	95 (14)	5 (7)	12 (20)
Other	291 (36)	244 (37)	30 (40)	17 (29)

Table 2

Prevalence of non-gang youth, peripheral youth, and gang members who committed offenses at least once in the past six months

Type of delinquency	Non-gang (*N* = 584)		Peripheral (*N* = 75)		Gang (*N* = 59)	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Minor offending	342	52	43	57	38	64
Avoid paying for merchandise	263	40	33	44	35	59
Damaged or destroyed property	169	26	27	36	18	31
Property offending	179	27	26	35	24	41
Stolen items worth less than £50	170	26	25	33	22	37
Stolen items worth more than £50	25	4	4	5	4	7
Break and enter to steal	24	4	5	7	4	7
Stolen a motor vehicle	9	1	0	0	1	2
Crimes against person	330	50	46	61	35	59
Hit someone	327	49	46	61	34	58
Attacked with a weapon	32	5	4	5	5	9
Used a weapon to get money	17	3	3	4	2	3
Other						
Truancy	201	30	22	29	28	48
Lie about age	301	45	43	57	41	70
Carry a weapon	32	5	6	8	6	10
Graffiti	37	6	7	9	7	12
Gang fight	62	9	9	12	10	17
Sell drugs	12	2	1	1	0	0
Used drugs	48	7	14	19	10	17

Table 3

Adjusted means and standard deviations for minor offending, property offending, crimes against people, and overall delinquency

Offending type		*M*	*SD*
Minor*	Gang (*N* = 59)	$3.60_{(a)}$	0.21
	Peripheral (*N* = 75)	$3.33_{(ab)}$	0.18
	Non-gang (*N* = 664)	$3.10_{(b)}$	0.06
Property	Gang (*N* = 59)	4.71	0.18
	Peripheral (*N* = 75)	4.69	0.15
	Non-gang (*N* = 664)	4.52	0.05
Crimes against people*	Gang (*N* = 59)	$4.18_{(ab)}$	0.18
	Peripheral (*N* = 75)	$4.26_{(a)}$	0.15
	Non-gang (*N* = 664)	$3.87_{(b)}$	0.05
Overall delinquency**	Gang (*N* = 59)	$22.49_{(a)}$	0.75
	Peripheral (*N* = 75)	$21.84_{(a)}$	0.65
	Non-gang (*N* = 664)	$20.27_{(b)}$	0.22

Note: Means adjusted for age, gender, and ethnicity. Means that do not share subscripts differ at $p < .05$.

* $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$

Table 4

Adjusted means and standard deviations for anti-authority attitudes, perceived importance of social status, perception of out-group threat, and moral disengagement

Psychological variable		*M*	*SD*
Anti-authority attitudes*	Gang (*N* = 59)	$39.30_{(a)}$	1.35
	Peripheral (*N* = 75)	$36.85_{(ab)}$	1.18
	Non-gang (*N* = 664)	$35.93_{(b)}$	0.40
Perceived importance of social status**	Gang (*N* = 59)	$58.93_{(a)}$	1.74
	Peripheral (*N* = 75)	$57.31_{(a)}$	1.52
	Non-gang (*N* = 664)	$54.03_{(b)}$	0.51
Perception of out-group threat	Gang (*N* = 59)	2.13	0.14
	Peripheral (*N* = 75)	1.97	0.12
	Non-gang (*N* = 664)	2.08	0.04
Moral disengagement	Gang (*N* = 59)	77.03	2.47
	Peripheral (*N* = 75)	75.43	2.17
	Non-gang (*N* = 664)	72.16	0.73

Note: Means adjusted for age, gender, and ethnicity. Means that do not share subscripts differ at $p < .05$.

* $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$

Table 5

Adjusted means and standard deviations for the eight moral disengagement strategies

Moral disengagement strategy		*M*	*SD*
Moral justification	Gang (*N* = 59)	12.47	0.48
	Peripheral (*N* = 75)	12.48	0.42
	Non-gang (*N* = 664)	11.77	0.14
Euphemistic labelling*	Gang (*N* = 59)	$9.12_{(a)}$	0.39
	Peripheral (*N* = 75)	$8.92_{(ab)}$	0.34
	Non-gang (*N* = 664)	$8.24_{(b)}$	0.12
Advantageous comparison	Gang (*N* = 59)	7.33	0.40
	Peripheral (*N* = 75)	6.72	0.35
	Non-gang (*N* = 664)	6.81	0.12
Displacement of responsibility*	Gang (*N* = 59)	$10.17_{(ab)}$	0.46
	Peripheral (*N* = 75)	$10.54_{(a)}$	0.41
	Non-gang (*N* = 664)	$9.57_{(b)}$	0.14
Diffusion of responsibility	Gang (*N* = 59)	9.27	0.48
	Peripheral (*N* = 75)	9.79	0.42
	Non-gang (*N* = 664)	9.53	0.14
Distortion of consequences	Gang (*N* = 59)	9.04	0.43
	Peripheral (*N* = 75)	8.25	0.37
	Non-gang (*N* = 664)	8.33	0.13
Attribution of blame*	Gang (*N* = 59)	$10.85_{(a)}$	0.40
	Peripheral (*N* = 75)	$10.14_{(ab)}$	0.35
	Non-gang (*N* = 664)	$9.69_{(b)}$	0.12
Dehumanization	Gang (*N* = 59)	8.79	0.47
	Peripheral (*N* = 75)	8.61	0.42
	Non-gang (*N* = 664)	8.22	0.14

Note: Means adjusted for age, gender, and ethnicity. Means that do not share subscripts differ at $p < .05$.

* $p < 0.05$.