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Group Processes & Intergroup Relations

Understanding gang membership: The significance of group processes

Abstract:	Gang researchers have robustly established that gangs facilitate increased delinquency in members – even those who were prolifically delinquent before joining a gang (Klein, Weerman & Thornberry, 2006). This suggests that there is something about gang membership, specifically, that influences individuals in a pro-criminal direction. However, so far it is not clear what this influence is. This paper, taking a social psychological perspective on gang membership considers the potential influence that group processes exert on gang members to conform to group norms, to become cohesive and to strive to acquire group goals - such as status. It further speculates that adherence to group norms may cultivate gang members' social cognitions such as moral disengagement, offense supportive cognitions and rumination. Conclusions note how group processes deserve closer research attention due to their potential for informing more accurate gang interventions to deter potential members and to reduce existing gang membership.

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members – even those who were prolifically delinquent before gang membership (Klein,

Weerman, & Thornberry, 2006). This suggests that there is something about gang

membership, specifically, that influences individuals' criminality. However, so far it is not

clear what this influence is. This paper, taking a social psychological perspective on gang

membership considers the potential influence that group processes exert on gang members to

identify with a gang, to conform to group norms, become cohesive and to strive to acquire

group goals - such as status. It further speculates that adherence to group norms may cultivate

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to their potential for informing more accurate gang interventions to deter potential members

and to reduce existing gang membership.

Analyses of group processes, and how they shape gang member behaviors and are shaped by them are notably absent in recent gang research literature. (Hughes, 2006: p. 44)

Group membership is key to human social existence. Families, ethnic groups, friendship networks provide us with identities that define us, shape our attitudes and beliefs and inspire our behaviors. Gangs are groups that are thought to provide members with positive elements such as protection, support and loyalty. However, they also promote and facilitate violence – resulting in members being disproportionately criminal (Chu, Daffern, Thomas, & Lim, 2012) and disproportionately targeted as victims (Katz, Webb, Fox, & Shaffer, 2011). Currently, we know little about the psychological processes that underpin gang membership (Wood & Alleyne, 2010) and despite the enduring recognition by researchers that group processes play a vital part in gang membership (Klein & Maxson, 2006; Short & Strodtbeck, 1965;), little is known about which *specific group processes* underpin gang membership or how they influence *social cognitions* in individual members. Aside from a gap in our knowledge and theories, this leaves programs designed to reduce gang membership under-informed. If we aim to motivate members to leave a gang it is essential to fully understand the nature of what it is a gang offers, culturally and psychologically, and to construct evidence-based programs using this knowledge.

This paper uses the concepts included in unified theory as a backdrop to achieve two main aims. Its first aim is to provide an overview of how certain group processes (e.g. social identity theory, self-categorization theory and uncertainty-identity theory) may function to motivate youth to join a gang. It then moves on to consider how once they are gang members group processes (e.g. reputation enhancement theory, cohesion and pluralistic ignorance) influence youth to adopt and adhere to gang norms. The second aim of this paper is to suggest how group processes function to influence the development of gang members' social cognitions (e.g. moral disengagement, social dominance theory and cognitive schemas) and

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their subsequent responses to outgroup others (e.g. displaced aggression, perceptions of entitativity). The purpose of these aims is to make suggestions for future research agendas that include an examination of specific group processes. Conclusions to the paper include suggestions that may be useful for developing future research agendas. Conclusions also point out that if we are to develop interventions that successfully target gang joining and gang membership; there is a critical need for the psychology of group processes to be taken in to consideration when addressing gang members' criminogenic needs.

The theoretical constructs included in this paper are by no means exhaustive and there is no attempt to concentrate on any one theoretical perspective – since any one theory merits its own paper. Instead the aim is to provide a *broad range* of potential social psychological theories and constructs that have significant potential for informing gang research and consequently develop gang theory. Focusing on one theory alone would not provide an overview of the vast range of possibilities that psychology has to offer this area of research. Instead, the paper's aim is to provide an outline rather than an in-depth evaluation of group processes.

The promise of gang membership: Perceptions of the group

Although many gang researchers do not accept that gangs should be defined by their involvement in criminal activity (see Wood and Alleyne, 2010, for a fuller discussion), there is a growing consensus that a gang's criminal activity (i.e. breaking the law - rather than nuisance behavior) is a defining feature of the group (Weerman et al., 2009). Gangs form just like any other group - because they offer members something that they want or need (Goldstein, 2002), yet so far, we know little about how gangs form (Hughes, 2013). Unified theory of gang involvement (Wood & Alleyne, 2010) posits that youth develop a social perception of gangs – via gang presence in their neighborhoods or via media images and that

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the impression that youth of gangs may be that they offer opportunities that more legitimate

life pathways do not. Research supports this proposition by showing that gangs appear to

offer the chance for youth to gain status, identity, companionship (Klein, 1995) and respect

from others (Anderson, 1999). Media representations of rewards for gang-like behavior may

act as a blueprint for aspiring gang members (Przemieniecki, 2005) and have a persuasive

influence on youth raised in cultures that strongly associate success with material wealth

(Toy & Stanko, 2008). Gangs have also been noted as offering youth power: a coercive

power (threat/use of force and violence), a power to pay, buy, and impress, and the power of

status within the gang's hierarchy (Knox, 1994). Consequently, unified theory notes how

youth motivated to join gangs will be those who feel most alienated from legitimate social

controls such as families, education systems, and prosocial community contexts (Marshall,

Webb & Tilley, 2005). In an atmosphere where officially recognized means of success often

appear to be inaccessible, gangs may appear to offer youth friendship, pride, a sense of

identity, improved self-esteem, excitement, and access to financial assets (Goldstein, 2002).

Since gangs are groups, their collective compositions appear to offer emotional bonding with

other members, a sense of belonging to a group and protection from being victimized by

outsiders (Vigil, 1988). As a group, a gang also offers members a strong psychological sense

of community by means of an actual and a psychological neighborhood (Goldstein, 1991).

Consequently, youth may modify, or even discard their existing legitimate social controls

(e.g., school) in favor of the appealing advantages that gang membership seems to offer.

Gang membership: Identifying with a gang

Youth go through an identity formation process during adolescence (Erikson, 1968) and, as

unified theory states, will select peer group friendships based on shared similarities. Research

shows how, unlike gang youth, youth who have little interest in gangs derive positive feelings

from their academic abilities and believe that they will have successful future careers,

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(Dukes, Martinez, & Stein, 1997) and are likely to choose prosocial friendships and activities (Wood & Alleyne, 2010). In contrast, youth who join gangs are less confident in their academic abilities (Dukes et al., 1997) and so they may, for reasons of underachievement and/or loss of interest, begin to disengage with school and scholarly-inclined peer groups. As they reject familiar childhood groups and practices, it is likely that they will experience feelings of uncertainty about their attitudes, their future, and, importantly, their identity (Hogg, Kruglanski, & van den Bos, 2013). *Uncertainty-identity theory* (Hogg, 2000) explains that feeling uncertain about personal identity motivates people to identify with a group and, in line with *social categorization* tenets (Abrams & Hogg, 2010; Tajfel & Turner, 1986;) use their group membership to categorize themselves and others according to sets of attitudes and behaviors that epitomize group membership. Since research shows how disrupted school bonding is a strong predictor of delinquent behavior (Henry, Knight, & Thornberry, 2012) and future gang membership (Henry, 2010), education-disillusioned youth may find that joining a gang, provides the positive reinforcement that they need of their views, their self and, as a result, reduce their identity uncertainty.

Social identity approaches, including *social identity theory* (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and *self-categorization theory* (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) maintain that once people identify with a group they experience further shaping of their self-view (see also Goldman, Giles & Hogg, this volume). As a new gang member strives to live up to gang membership expectations, s/he may begin to develop a new personal identity that corresponds to the group's overarching identity. Evidence shows how a gang member's personal identity may develop from a focus on how their individual needs blend with the group's characteristics and function (Vigil, 1988). That is, part of their self-concept (i.e., how they *think* about themselves) develops from being a member of their group (Hogg & Reid, 2006). As gangs offer the potential for gaining power, status, identity, friendship etc. (as outlined

above), then gang membership is likely to help youth forge a more positive self-concept (i.e.,

people like me, I have a lot of friends, I am worth knowing).

Social identity theory also includes how individuals *feel* about themselves. Self-

esteem hypothesis notes that people are motivated to hold positive self-views (Hogg &

Abrams, 1988) and group membership may increase members' self-esteem - even if their

relationship with the group is limited to basking in reflected glory (e.g., supporting a

successful football team). The positive emotions derived from group membership then work

to cement the group-individual relationship (Cialdini et al., 1976). Gang membership may

enhance members' self-esteem as the support they derive via their membership verifies their

individual value, and, when the gang's group esteem increases (principally due to successful

criminal activities), their individual self-esteem will also increase, particularly if they

previously had low self-esteem (Dukes et al., 1997).

On joining a gang and intertwining personal identities with gang identities, members

will have more opportunities for criminal learning and as they identify with the group and its

delinquent activities, they may put the group's aims before their own. In Hennigan and

Spanovic's (2012) social identity approach to gang membership findings showed how

compared to nongang youth, gang youth, who identify with their group, put the group norms

of criminal activity ahead of their personal concerns regarding punishment for criminal

activity. As the authors 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" (Hennigan & Spanovic, 2012, p. 143). Thus, the social

identity impact of gang membership seems to exert a powerful sway over members to the

point where they set aside personal needs or concerns in favor of the group and its norms of

criminal activity.

Group effects in gangs: conforming, cohesion and pluralistic ignorance

As noted above, youth often admire gangs and so it is only to be expected that aspiring gang members will be eager to adopt the group's social norms and communicative practices in order to be accepted (see also Hogg and Giles, 2012). The commanding influence of social norms on individuals has long been known by social psychologists who note that people will conform to others' decisions - even when those others are obviously wrong (e.g., Asch, 1951). Social psychologists have also shown that when individuals want to be accepted by others, they will comply with those others' social norms to gain approval (Cooper, Kelly, & Weaver, 2004). This conformity is even more likely if individuals value or admire the group (David & Turner, 1996). On joining a group, members become especially vulnerable to the group's social influences - particularly if they strongly identify with the group (Cooper et al., 2004). Adherence to ingroup norms will also result from a member's fear of being on the receiving end of social sanctions imposed by the group on norm-violating members (Rimal & Real, 2003) since the potential rejection of friends or admired others is particularly threatening (Baron & Kerr, 2003). Consequently, given the power of ingroup influences and the eagerness with which aspiring gang members accept them, it is likely that gang members, unlike nongang youth, will feel compelled to abide by group norms such as involvement in criminal activity (Viki & Abrams, 2012). This effect may be even more powerful for youth who are vulnerable or isolated because they feel alienated from legitimate social controls such as family or school.

The above does not suggest that group members always *agree* with group norms. The concept of *pluralistic ignorance* suggests that individual group members may privately reject a social norm but still abide by it publicly because they believe (often wrongly) that other group members are in favor of it (O'Gorman, 1986; Reid, Giles & Harwood, 2005). Because each member of the group believes that they are alone in their disagreement with the norm,

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they do not publicly oppose it and this serves to perpetuate a belief among the group that the

majority accept it. This was demonstrated by findings which showed that even though most

university students were not comfortable with the accepted levels of students' drinking habits

- they believed that other students were quite happy with the norm (Prentice & Miller, 1993).

Research has noted the existence of pluralistic ignorance in gang members who have

expressed privately that they feel extreme discomfort with some of their criminal activities

(Matza, 1964). This makes intuitive sense. Some gang members are not delinquent before

joining a gang (Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith, & Tobin, 2003) and so it is highly likely

that new members will experience extreme discomfort at some of the more delinquent norms

that the gang subscribes to. It may even be the case that more elite members of a gang

anticipate members' pluralistic ignorance and counter it by demanding delinquent acts,

particularly from new members, to foster group homogeneity, adherence to norms and self-

categorization as a group member. And, as members' identification with their chosen group

intensifies, the more likely they are to believe in the group's norms (Reid, Cropley, & Hogg,

2005). New gang members may feel compelled to participate in criminal activities that

individually they would steer clear of to establish greater similarity to other ingroup members

and to prove that they are prototypical group members (see Pickett and Brewer, 2001, for a

fuller discussion on maintaining ingroup inclusion). To resolve feelings of cognitive

dissonance that are likely to stem from taking part in [more] criminal acts, new members will

engage in dissonance reduction by bringing their cognitions and actions into line by changing

their attitudes so that they are compatible with their behavior (Festinger, 1962). Hence, as

unified theory posits, gang membership will work to influence both the behavior and social

cognitive development of individuals and committed gang members who feel rooted to the

group (core members) may, over time, grow to *genuinely* endorse group norms that less

committed members (peripheral members) may privately reject – at least initially. Either way,

gang members are likely to publicly accept and adhere to group norms and where norms

involve criminal activity, gang members will become more criminal and this may lead to

greater group cohesion (Klein & Maxson, 2006).

Cohesion is a group process that has received a fair amount of attention from gang

researchers. Cohesion underpins a gang's social interactions and its behaviors (Klein, 1995)

and is derived from three main processes. The first is the *attraction* that members feel

towards the gang and its members. The second is the *motivation* that members have to

participate in the gang's activities and to contribute to the group's goals. The third is the

coordination of gang member effort (Goldstein, 2002). Social psychological examinations of

the effects of cohesion date back several decades. For example, Festinger, Schachter, and

Back (1950) saw cohesion as a "field of forces" that worked on group members, compelling

them to stay with the group. Cohesion has since been considered as a multi- or bi-

dimensional construct (see Dion, 2000, for a fuller discussion) where, for example, *vertical*

cohesion derives from the extent that members trust and respect the group's leaders and

horizontal cohesion derives from the feelings, respect and trust that members have for each

other. A further 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 seems to reflect the individual's evaluation of his/her relationship with the group

which derives from cognitive elements (appraisals of experiences) and from affective

elements (feelings about experiences). However, as Dion (2000) notes, cohesion probably

holds different meanings for different groups depending on their goals and tasks.

A meta-analysis examining cohesion concludes that highly cohesive groups are more

productive than less cohesive groups (Evans & Dion, 1991) and, as Klein (1995) observes,

gangs produce crime. Consequently, highly cohesive gangs are presumably more efficient in

mobilizing their membership and accessing commodities such as drugs and weapons

(Hughes, 2013). Klein (1995) considers cohesion to be "…the quintessential group process"

(p. 43) and its influence leads members to become loyal, committed and ready to make

sacrifices for their group which they view with pride and respect (Crocker, Luhtanen, Blaine,

& Broadnax, 1994). Importantly, this effect is enduring - holding sway with the individual

even after they have left a gang (Pyrooz, Decker, & Webb, 2010).

In gangs, high levels of cohesiveness may facilitate members' criminal activity

because highly cohesive members identify strongly with the group, share similar attitudes,

and are willing to accept and endorse group norms of criminal activity (Hughes, 2013).

However, cohesion can work both ways. Some findings suggest that high cohesion results in

high criminal activity, since group offenses – particularly intergang offenses – foster group

collaboration to satisfy group goals and group productivity, such as violence (Klein, 1971).

Conversely, other findings suggest that low cohesion also facilitates criminal activity

amongst gang members, because it prevents the group from adequately regulating members'

violence to others (Jansyn, 1966), and this increases intragang conflict (Hughes, 2013).

Indeed, evidence supports that dis-organized groups fails to generate compliance among

members leading to more gang member murders occurring *within* than *between* gangs

(Decker & Curry, 2002). Poor gang cohesion also prevents the group from showing unity and

sending out the message to rival gangs that attacks on the group will be met with certain

retaliation. Without this certainty of retaliation, rival gangs will see the group as vulnerable

and attack it (Hughes, 2013). The implications of the above are that to accomplish the

group's aims, gangs need to be cohesive – just as Klein observed. If they are not cohesive

then their membership will be more disorderly and likely to direct their violence at one

another. Consequently, cohesion is an important group process in gang membership

inasmuch as its presence or absence may be expected to result in violence. The only

difference between cohesive and non-cohesive gangs is whether that violence is directed

outside the group or to its own membership.

Gangs, intergroup conflict and status enhancement

Social psychologists such as Hogg (2004) posit that the reason that groups exist is because

there are outgroups and this prompts people to sort out where they belong in reference to

others (Bruner, 1957). An understanding of where one belongs then forms a basis for

individual action in social contexts. For example, an individual who belongs to a specific

gang has a meaningful understanding of his/her relationship with members of his/her own

gang, with members of other gangs, non-gang members and the police (Viki & Abrams,

2012). To gain an understanding of personal positioning, group members employ basic

psychological processes such as *social categorization*. Social categorization processes

facilitate a clear-cut picture of one's own and others' social group membership and enables

emotional values to be attached to those groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Social psychologists

have robustly demonstrated how people use social categorization processes as a basis for bias

- and how these biases can derive from minimal information - even about one's own group.

For example, classic studies show that forming temporary groups arbitrarily (e.g. grouped

according to people's over- or under-estimation of total dots on a piece of paper), with no

history of conflict and no potential for future conflict, can lead to ingroup favoritism when

allocating money to anonymous ingroup or outgroup others (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Explanations for this minimal group effect include that ingroup favoritism results from what

people assume others expect of them (Wilder, 1986) or because they anticipate reciprocal

favoritism from ingroup others (Jetten, Spears, & Manstead, 1996). Whatever the

explanations, and work is still being conducted to establish the reasons for the minimal group

effect, (see Hogg, 2013 for a more in-depth discussion), the upshot is that people are prone to

create 'them and us' categories and use these as a basis to make distinctions that favor their

own group.

Gangs also engage in social categorization processes. Gang identities are often

defined in reference to other gangs - in particular, to those with whom intergroup conflict

exists (Papachristos, Hureau, & Braga, 2013). These outgroups are then used as points of

reference to assess a gang's actions and status (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996). *Social*

dominance theory (SDT: Sidanius & Pratto, 1999 – see also Densley, Cai & Hilal, this

volume) explains the processes that underpin group competition for status. SDT explains that

group members with a high *social dominance orientation* (SDO) feel compelled to enhance,

or reinforce, their group's place in a social hierarchy. To achieve status, SDT explains, social

hierarchies involving informal groups (such as gangs) may be arbitrarily constructed to

respond to situational factors such as competition for valued resources. For example, gangs

may endeavor to enhance or reinforce their group's status in comparison to other gangs in an

arbitrary-set system where illegal resources (e.g., narcotics) are valued resources. Although

research examining group processes such as SDT in the context of gangs is still in its infancy,

findings indicate that individuals involved in gang activity have high levels of SDO (Wood,

Alleyne, Mozova, & James, 2013).

As gangs work to enhance their group's status in an arbitrary-set system, threats to

group aims from rival gangs may trigger intergroup violence (Aldridge, Medina, & Ralphs,

2008; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996;). As Densley (2013) observes, "Violence is central to

gang life..." (p. 118) and gang members see violence as fundamental to protecting territory

and/or gang business. Consequently, the currency of a gang's intergroup enmity is violence

stemming from competition for power, domination, reputation, respect and status (Harding,

2012). Intergroup transgressions cannot be allowed to go unpunished if a gang is to hold on

to its status and so status and prior conflict are perhaps the most common reasons for

intergang violence (Hughes & Short 2005; Papachristos 2009). In turn, use of violence

against rivals will help a gang save face, protects its members, and exact revenge on opposing

groups for transgressions against the gang (Papachristos, et al., 2013). It also sends out a

message to other groups that this gang is able to look after its interests and its membership –

which, in turn, enhances the gang's reputation (Papachristos et al., 2013 – see also above

regarding gang cohesion effects).

Gang membership also influences individual members' reputations by providing them

with the opportunity to enhance their personal status and, as research shows, status is highly

prized by those involved in prison gang activity (South & Wood, 2006; Wood et al., 2013;

Wood, Moir, & James, 2009) and by street gang members (Alleyne & Wood, 2010). On

becoming a gang member individual status will emerge from the reputation acquired as part

of the group. *Reputation enhancement theory* shows how group membership influences

individual behavior because members select a self-image to display in front of specific others

(Emler & Reicher, 1995). These others then provide positive feedback that reinforces the

individual's image within the group. For gang members, criminal activity will be key to

developing a personal reputation within the group, since criminal activity is a valued gang

product. Criminal activity, particularly violence, also works to protect individual members

from future victimization (Emler & Reicher, 1995). In their study of gangs, Harris, Turner,

Garratt, and Atkinson, (2011) note:

> 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 victimization from others. (p. 20)

Research has shown that violence is such an important group norm for gang members

that it is even used when committing 'petty crimes' (Harris et al., 2011). Evidence further

confirms the tenets of reputation enhancement theory by showing how being violent achieves

status, enhances reputations and expresses members' commitment to the group, which, in

turn, prevents expulsion from the group (Harris et al., 2011; see also Pickett and Brewer,

2001). The implication here is that violence is gang currency which is used by members to

negotiate and enhance their position in the gang hierarchy. In his ethnographic study of gang

youth, Densley (2013) observes "Interviewees were clear that serious violence was the fastest

way to rise to the top." (p.85). Gang members also consider violence to be necessary for

obtaining material possessions and to achieve a comfortable high-status lifestyle (Harris et

al., 2011). However, as Densley notes, there may also be caveats to gang members' use of

violence. Gangs often expect certain levels of responsibility from individual members and

although violence should be sufficient to enhance both the individual's and the gang's

reputation, it should not be so severe that it attracts too much police attention and the

constraints that police attention imposes on gang threaten gang business since, "A dead body

for instance, leaves corroborating forensic evidence and invites the full weight of police

investigatory resources." (Densley, 2013, p. 85).

Gang membership: developing/exacerbating individual social cognitions

Currently little is known about the specific psychological influence that gang membership has

on individual members' social cognitions (Wood & Alleyne, 2010). Criminological theories

have so far paid little attention to the social psychology of gang membership (Thornberry et

al., 2003). However, as individual differences gain conceptual importance in gang research, a

more social psychological approach is gradually beginning to emerge. Unified theory (Wood

& Alleyne, 2010) draws on criminological and psychological concepts to explain gang

membership and considers some of the most likely social cognitions and attitudes that will be

shaped according to involvement gang membership.

Moral disengagement

Unified theory explains that to adhere to group norms of criminal activity, gang members

may need to adjust their social cognitions and if they do so they may resolve the cognitive

dissonance that arises from their increased involvement in criminal activity. One way for

gang members to achieve dissonance reduction is to set aside their existing moral standards

(morally disengage – see also Alleyne, Fernandes, & Pritchard, this volume). *Moral*

disengagement is a social cognitive process that enables people to justify harmful acts and

resolve the cognitive dissonance and self-condemnation associated with violating personal

moral standards (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996).

Moral disengagement involves eight socio-cognitive mechanisms which function at

three levels of social processing. The **first level** allows inhumane acts (e.g., violence) to be

reinterpreted. Socio-cognitive mechanisms at this level include: *moral justification* (behavior

is in a worthy cause - that it can further gang status), *euphemistic language* (a sanitizing

description of harm - e.g. violence may be described as ''gang business''), and *advantageous*

comparisons where individual behavior is favorably compared with others' worse behavior

(e.g. our group only assaults - others kill). The **second level** enables the *displacement of*

responsibility on to authority figures (individual behavior stems from authority figures'

directives - so personal responsibility is negated - see also Hogg & Giles, 2012 for a fuller

discussion of leadership effects on individual members), *diffusion of responsibility*

(responsibility for the harm done is shared by several perpetrators - thus this absolves

individuals from blame), and *distorting the consequences* of harm (ignoring, minimizing, or

disbelieving that any harm has been done). The **third level** distorts the way the victim is

viewed and denies them victim status via *dehumanization* processes (the victim is considered

to be subhuman and devoid of accepted human qualities – see also Alleyne et al., this

volume) or victim *blaming* (they got what they deserved).

Findings show that when youth want to be accepted by a chosen group, they will set

aside their moral standards (Emler & Reicher, 1995). Evidence further shows that groups

such as street gangs (Alleyne & Wood, 2010) and groups involved in prison gang activity

(Wood, Moir, & James, 2009; Wood et al., 2013) set aside, either unconsciously or

deliberately, their moral standards to engage in illegal behavior. An ability to morally

disengage has also been empirically linked with an increased use of violence (Bandura et al.,

1996). Moral disengagement further mediates pathways between impoverished

neighborhoods strongly associated with gang membership, and anti-social behavior (Hill,

Lui, & Hawkins, 2001) and between low levels of empathy and anti-social behavior. As

Hyde, Shaw, and Moilanen (2010) 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 criminally active, youth may have begun to employ some moral

disengagement strategies to justify their criminal activity. However, even if they gained, for

instance, financially, from their pre-gang crime they are also likely to have been on the

receiving end of moral condemnation from parents, teachers and others and this may have

helped to curb at least some of their criminal activity. In contrast, once they join a gang

where crime and violence are normative they are likely to receive dual reinforcement - first

from any material gains such as finance from illicit activities, and second, from the

communicated approval of other gang members. Positive approval from other group members

will also serve to reinforce the member's commitment to the group (Esbensen, Huizinga, &

Weiher, 1993) and help to reduce, if not negate, the effect of outgroup others' (e.g. parents'

and teachers') moral condemnation for criminal acts. Importantly, positive reinforcement of

criminal activity by ingroup members may also likely to intensify and expand the use of

existing moral disengagement processes.

Group processes in gangs may also facilitate the use of *additional* moral

disengagement strategies. Compared to nongang youth, gang members are more likely to be

violently victimized, sexually assaulted (males or females), to suffer serious injuries from

fighting (Taylor, Freng, Esbensen, & Peterson, 2008) and be targeted by rival gangs (Sanders,

1994). Being on the receiving end of increased victimization may increase members'

inclination to justify their violence to others such as rival gang members. Evidence supports

this idea by showing how street gang members, compared to nongang youth, employ more

victim blaming strategies (Alleyne & Wood, 2010). Peripheral gang members, compared to

nongang youth, also use more *displacement of responsibility* strategies to justify their

criminal activity (Alleyne & Wood, 2010). In a group which has a hierarchy of members

peripheral members, eager to establish their worth, will strive to establish greater similarity to

other ingroup members "…in order to achieve greater ingroup prototypicality." (Pickett &

Brewer, 2001, p. 101). To achieve this prototypicality they are likely to be eager to follow the

lead and/or instructions of those higher up the chain of the group's hierarchy. In other words,

they follow orders - or at least they believe they are doing so (Alleyne & Wood, 2010). Either

way, it seems that the group processes involved in gang membership and gang hierarchies are

likely to endorse and further widen members' moral disengagement strategies.

Offence supportive cognitions

Unified theory posits that on becoming involved in a gang, members' pro-aggression

cognitions, beliefs and attitudes will be fostered/generated. *Cognitive schemas* are cognitive

structures that enable individuals to screen, encode and evaluate social stimuli (Beck, 1964).

Essentially they are mental structures that hold previous knowledge, and contain attitudes,

beliefs and assumptions about oneself, others and the world (Mann & Beech, 2003). They

are, in short, categories of information that have been generated from past experiences. Some

theorists refer to cognitive schema as *implicit theories* (ITs) since they claim this more

accurately explains how people develop explanatory theories of the world, and generate and

test hypotheses to predict future events – just as scientific theories do (Ward, 2000). ITs

function on two main psychological constructs: beliefs and desires (Polaschek, Calvert, &

Gannon, 2009) and are implicit because holders seldom explicitly express them (Ward,

2000).

If new information suggests that an IT is wrong then it may be revised (Polaschek et

al., 2009). However, people are highly motivated to interpret information in an IT-consistent

manner, which means that ITs are often deeply entrenched and resistant to change (Ward,

2000). This makes it more likely that inconsistent incoming information will be re-interpreted

so that it is consistent with existing ITs (Polaschek et al., 2009). To achieve consistency

people skew or *cognitively distort* incoming information. Evidence shows, for example, that

people who hold ITs that other people are generally hostile and self-serving will interpret an

accidental bump from another as stemming from malevolent intentions (Epps & Kendall,

1995).

On joining a gang, accepting its norms, striving to achieve status via criminal activity, and assimilating the necessary ingroup/outgroup biases associated with the new group, members may use cognitive distortions to support personal involvement in pro-gang, pro-criminal activity. As noted above, positive reinforcements communicated from other gang members for acts of aggression on behalf of the gang, are likely to encourage a new member to develop additional pro-aggressive cognitive distortions. These will then be assimilated in to the gang member's memory and corresponding ITs to act as a guide for future behavior.

The value of ITs has been amply demonstrated in research with sexual offenders (Polaschek & Ward, 2002; Ward & Keenan, 1999). An IT approach has also been used to examine intimate partner violence (Gilchrist, 2008; Weldon & Gilchrist, 2012; see also Pornari, Dixon, and Humphreys, 2013, for a review), and firesetting (Ó Ciardha & Gannon, 2012). Although ITs among gang members have not been directly investigated, research has examined the ITs of violent offenders. Taking a grounded theory approach, Polaschek et al., (2009) found four primary ITs that violent offenders hold. The first, and arguably the most important, as it underpins several of the others, is a *normalization of violence* as an effective form of communication, to resolve conflicts and to generate respect from others. Personal victimization and consequences for victims – either physical and/or psychological are also minimized by violent offenders. This IT is especially relevant to what we know about gang members. As already noted, violence is a gang norm and, just as violent offenders do, gang members use violence to resolve conflicts, and to gain respect and status from others. They also, like violent offenders, minimize the importance of personal victimization (see Hennigan & Spanovic, 2012, above), and as will be discussed below, they hold views of their victims consistent with a lack of concern.

The second IT identified in violent offenders is *beat or be beaten,* and includes two subtypes (*self-enhancement* and *self-preservation*). The underlying assumption here is that

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the individual sees a need to strike first in the violence stakes – otherwise others may gain an

advantage in what s/he perceives is a violent world. Because gang worlds are peppered with

violence, their intergroup conflict may well function on members' beliefs that they need to

strike first. The self-enhancement subtype seems particularly relevant to the group norms of

gangs because it states that violence is necessary to achieve and/or maintain status and to

demonstrate one's dominance over others. The self-preservation subtype relates to a mistrust

of others and how violence is seen as necessary to prevent people 'walking all over them.' As

noted above, in the world of intergroup conflict that gangs inhabit, retaliation is a group norm

that members are expected to adhere to if they want to gain and maintain status and respect

for the group and for the self.

The third IT is *I am the law* and refers to violent offenders' beliefs in personal

superiority and an entitlement or even obligation to discipline others by assaulting or harming

them. Violence is also seen by violent offenders as necessary to protect others or the social

order from the perceived harm caused by outsiders. This IT is also relevant to gang members'

retaliatory attacks against opposing gangs and it may also be relevant to how gangs award

and maintain hierarchies within their groups (e.g., core and peripheral membership). That

gangs also use violence to protect the social order is supported by evidence showing how

gangs have been known to protect the social order by "policing" neighborhood events - even

better than the police (Patillo, 1998).

The final violent offender IT identified by Polaschek et al., was *I get out of control*.

This refers to problems with self-control and self-regulation which stems from rage or

uncontrollable anger. Links between gang membership and a lack of self-control have been

well-established in theories such as Gottfredson and Hirschi's, (1990), general theory of

crime, and empirical findings support that a lack of self-control is a key predictor of gang

membership (Esbensen & Osgood, 1999). Evidence also shows how gang youth use their

group membership as a coping strategy for negative emotions such as anger, frustration, and anxiety (Eitle, Gunkel, & van Gundy, 2004; Klemp-North, 2007). Recent findings further show that gang members suffer from high levels of anxiety disorder and psychosis (Coid et al., 2013), which are also associated with a lack of self-control (e.g., Novaco, 1997).

Although ITs have not been examined directly in gang members, the similarities noted between violent offenders' ITs and gang group norms suggest that becoming a gang member is likely to nurture and/or develop offense supportive cognitions – or ITs. Since research regarding the psychology of gang membership is still in its infancy, we do not yet have the evidence to decide whether the group norms of gangs play a causal role in the development of members' pro-delinquent ITs. However, the evidence we have so far suggests that even if gang membership does not *cause* pro-delinquent ITs, it is likely to strengthen any that already exist as youth adopt and assimilate the pro-crime group norms and values of a gang.

Group loyalty and anti-authority attitudes

As members adopt gang norms and their social cognitive processes are developed and/or exacerbated by their group membership they may develop a group and individual "oppositional culture" where the group is set in opposition to legitimate authorities (Moore & Vigil, 1987). This process begins as members begin to reject legitimate social institutions such as school and identify with the gang, as noted above. However, becoming a gang member seems to nurture and extend this rejection of legitimate roles. As Short and Strodtbeck, (1965) observe, "…. gang members are less favorably disposed toward adult incumbents of legitimate roles such as teacher, religious leader, policeman, businessman and politician than are their non-gang, lower class counterparts." (p. 275-276, see also Drury, 2010).

Findings examining the psychology of gang membership show how street gang

members (Alleyne & Wood, 2010), and those involved in prison gang activity (Wood et al.,

2013), hold strong anti-authority attitudes. Although anti-authority attitudes may be adopted

by many adolescents (Drury, 2010) and are therefore not unique to gang members, the

targeting of gangs in gang suppression programs are likely to bring gang members into

frequent and negative contact with authority figures more often than nongang adolescents.

The effect of this is that gangs may come to view themselves as unfairly targeted victims of

oppression (Lien, 2005) which, in turn, will help to reinforce their gang identities (McAra &

McVie, 2005; Ralphs, Medina, & Aldridge, 2009), strengthen their oppositional culture

(Klein & Maxson, 2006) and may even increase the number of gangs and associated criminal

activities (Hagedorn, 2008) as gangs become even more criminal to defend their group

identity (Ayling, 2011). Members may consider themselves as defenders of their group which

they see as being victimized by society. Identifying how gang members view this effect in an

Oslo sample, 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)

As Lien explains, gang members develop 'heroism' on behalf of their group and from

what they see as their personal victimization by society. Victimization of opponents is then

justified as each gang member strives to demonstrate loyalty to the group and to fulfil his/her

perceived obligation to other members, and, as Pickett and Brewer, (2001) note, this effect is

more likely to occur amongst the zealous new-comers to the group. Violent victimization of

outgroup members will be considered as necessary and deserved - particularly if selected

victims are members of a rival gang who are seen as meriting retribution (Klein & Maxson,

1989). However, what this suggests is that gang members do not have to experience *personal*

victimization in order to retaliate with violence. Moreover, gang members may feel beholden

to retaliate on *behalf* of their gang and the victimization of *any* of its members. In turn, this

suggests that group process effects will increase gang members' use of violence as they strive

to act for the group's best interests.

Rumination

There are, of course, psychological processes that support the development of this 'heroic'

obligation to the group. The intensity of a provocation positively relates to the experience of

rumination (Horowitz, 1986). *Response styles theory* (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991) explains that

rumination involves repetitive thinking about something that has caused distress. Rumination

can involve persistent thoughts about personal beliefs and feelings and/or about the

provoking event (Bushman, Bonacci, Pedersen, Vasquez, & Miller, 2005). It may also help

maintain negative affect long after the provocation (Lyubomirsky & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1995)

since its focus is on hostile and vengeful thoughts. As Bandura et al., (1996) note, hostile

rumination heightens feelings of aggression, which may or may not be acted on. However,

people who have set aside their normal moral constraints by employing moral disengagement

strategies (see above) are more likely to respond with aggression to perceived wrongs

(Bandura, et al., 1996). As Bandura et al., 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).

Perceptions that the gang is being victimized are likely to lead members to ruminate

individually and, potentially collectively as they communicate their ruminative thoughts to

other group members (see also Goldman et al., this volume). Because provoking events such

as victimization of group members may be considered to be crisis events for gangs, quick

decisions need to be made, which in turn, may then lead to *groupthink* (Janis, 1972).

Groupthink effectively suppresses dissent and/or adequate appraisal of potentially more

sensible alternatives and so more moderate group members may feel unable/unwilling to

voice objections to group decisions (see also pluralistic ignorance – above). Consequently,

gang members, motivated by feelings of self-righteousness, are likely to 'dwell' individually

and collectively on the perceived harms done to their group – and make hasty decisions

regarding retaliation – which will generally involve violence.

Evidence examining rumination in gang members suggests that gang members engage

in more rumination than do nongang youth (Vasquez, Osman, & Wood, 2012). Research

comparing male gang members' and violent men's (i.e. violent but not in a gang) psychiatric

morbidity also highlights the importance of rumination in gang members (Coid et al., 2013).

Coid et al., found that even though both violent men and gang members reported positive

attitudes to violence, gang members were more likely to be violently victimized, were more

likely to engage in violent ruminations and were more inclined to respond to perceived

disrespect with violence. Interestingly, Coid et al.,'s research further demonstrated how

violent ruminations, when combined with violent victimization and fears of future

victimization, explained the association between gang membership and anxiety disorders and

psychiatric morbidity (Coid et al., 2013). However, what is not certain yet is the causal

relationships between these factors. That is, gang membership may result from those with

higher levels of psychiatric morbidity becoming gang members or, equally, psychiatric

morbidity may be caused by gang membership – where gang members' experiences cause

them to be subjected to psychiatric symptoms. More work is needed to establish the exact

nature of this relationship.

Displaced aggression and entitativity

Even if gang members are motivated to retaliate against their transgressor(s), this may not

always be possible, and so they may direct their aggression at a substitute victim. This is

known as *displaced aggression* - aggression targeting either an innocent victim (Dollard,

Doob, Miller, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939), or a victim who has done little to provoke the levels

of aggression meted on them (Pedersen, Gonzales, & Miller, 2000). Findings so far suggest

that gang members are more inclined than other individuals to engage in displaced aggression

(Vasquez, Lickel, & Hennigan, 2010). For example, on the streets, gangs are likely to come

in to contact/conflict with authority figures, especially if those authority figures use gang

suppression tactics. However, retaliation against justice officials risks arrest and so gang

members may displace their aggression on to innocent others such as passers-by or even

family members such as siblings.

The effects of the initial provocation may also exacerbate and amplify levels of

displaced aggression. A meta-analysis shows that the more negative the setting of the

interaction between the aggressor and the victim of displaced aggression and the greater the

similarity between the original provocateur and the displaced aggression target, then the more

the target will be considered to deserve his/her victimization which, in turn, increases the

magnitude of aggression (Marcus-Newhall, Pedersen, Carlson, & Miller, 2000). Also, if the

original provocation occurs in the presence of others then it will exacerbate the aggressive

response to the displacement target. This may be because the individual feels humiliated and

is motivated to 'save face' with important others (Vasquez et al., 2013). Because gangs are

street oriented groups their altercations are likely to occur in front of others such as ingroup

and outgroup gang members (Weerman et al., 2009) and so street codes which communicate

a gangster identity must be adhered to (see also Goldman et al., this volume). Consequently,

individual gang members may be motivated to use extreme violence to protect and/or

enhance their status and reputation with their own and other gangs. Thus, group process effects may intensify the levels of aggression that gang members direct at others.

A further reason why gang members may use elevated levels of violence and indeed, be more at risk of being on the receiving end of violence 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 mere gatherings 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 groups could be considered to have entitativity if they moved together, resembled one another, were close to each other and formed a coherent figure. Extending Campbell's ideas, researchers have since proposed five antecedents to entitativity: the importance of the group to its members; the similarity of group members; the degree 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 leads to perceptions that a group has high entitativity has also been confirmed by research evidence (Hamilton, Sherman, & Rogers, 2004).

It is easy to see why gangs might be considered as being high in entitativity. They share patterns of age (members are often adolescent), they are predominantly male, and ethnically homogeneous (Klein, Weerman, & Thornberry, 2006) - although in the U.K. both street (Mares, 2001) and prison (Wood, 2006) gangs tend to form along regional rather than ethnic lines. Gangs also often adopt identifying features. For instance they may wear colors, clothing, argot, tattoos, hand signals, and emblems to emphasize their unique identity (Klein et al., 2006). In short, by adopting what they see as a *unique* identity, the group effectively communicates its entitativity. In turn, this may lead others, particularly provoked rivals, to believe that they are justified in violently targeting any member of the gang – even if that

individual member has done nothing to deserve victimization. Random targeting of an

opposing gang member is even more likely when it is difficult to identify the original

provocateur (e.g. in a drive-by shooting). In short, group membership raises the potential that

any and all members of a rival gang are justified targets of violence - since they are all the

same.

It seems, from the above, that gang membership has the potential to significantly

influence the social cognitive perspectives of individual members. When they join a gang,

and adopt a gang's group norms and behavior, this will in turn, as unified theory states, help

shape members' social cognitions. The influence of gang membership – or even the potential

for membership - may prompt the setting aside of existing moral standards so that the

individual's social cognitions fit with what they perceive as gang membership requirements.

They then adopt or develop pro-gang, pro-crime cognitive schemas or implicit theories

which, in turn, are fuelled by distorted cognitions and ruminative thinking. As their social

cognitions continue to be shaped by their gang membership they are more likely to believe

that violence is justified. The more that they see violence as justified then the more likely

they are to use it even displacing it on to undeserving others to save face and

maintain/acquire status. Entitivatity will help feed the pro-violent conduct of gang members

since the similarity of rival gangs justifies the targeting of any its membership. Work

examining the social cognitions of gang members is still in its infancy, but there is a wealth

of potential for research to examine more closely the above factors to further our

understanding of the social cognitions of gang members and the role that their group

membership plays in the development of those thought processes.

Conclusions

The idea of this paper was not to provide an in-depth analysis of the psychology of group

processes – or even an in-depth analysis of any one theory. Rather its rationale was to

promote a closer consideration of the psychology of group processes in gang membership. To

achieve this; it has boiled down theoretical detail in favor of a broader approach. The

theoretical propositions and empirical evidence outlined above, are therefore simply

snapshots aimed to flag the potential that the psychology of group processes has to offer the

study of gangs. It has not, however, attempted to include the *entire* wealth of theoretical

propositions that could be used to examine gangs and so some important work has,

reluctantly, been omitted. For instance, some of the theories with potential for studying gangs

not covered in this paper include: *realistic group conflict theory; social learning theory;*

leadership theories; deindividuation; intergroup emotions theory; hostile attribution bias and

optimal distinctiveness theory – to name a few.

However, to deliver some theoretical coherence, this paper used as its backdrop

unified theory which highlights how the pathway into gang membership is littered with

psychological constructs that, with a few exceptions, remain mostly untapped in gang

research. This is puzzling since social psychologists have robustly demonstrated for many

years how, for instance, social identity, social categorization, uncertainty-identity, and self-

esteem all play a role in group affiliation and that group membership, in turn, impacts the

way that members think and feel about themselves.

If we are to develop a research agenda into gang membership that includes

psychological theoretical propositions, then the group and social cognitive processes outlined

above may help to lay the foundations for a psychological research and intervention agenda.

An agenda for psychological research into gangs is large. Many important areas of gang

membership require attention. As a start, any examination of group processes in gangs must,

from necessity begin with a clear definitional perspective of what is meant by a gang.

Definitional issues have clouded gang research for most of the past century and been re-

visited many times (see also Maxson & Esbensen, 2012). However, the Eurogang definition

(Weerman et al., 2009) is the nearest we have to a consensual definition that is accepted

internationally by many scholars and practitioners (see Wood & Alleyne, 2010 for a more in-

depth discussion) and enables attention to be paid to comparative research – which, as Klein

(2006) notes is a crucial element of gang research. An equally crucial factor of psychological

research into gang membership will be methodology. Whilst psychometric evaluations may

provide are an extremely useful methodological pathway for a psychology of gang

membership, as psychological enquiry into gangs is in its infancy there is also a real need for

systematic qualitative analyses to be conducted. For example, grounded theory (Strauss &

Corbin, 1994) may provide in-depth insight from gang members since participants will not be

constrained by the limits imposed by questionnaire items. Qualitative approaches would also

be useful to devise hypotheses to test quantitatively regarding group processes in gangs.

Triangulation methods which employ both quantitative and qualitative methods would further

provide multi-method evaluations of research questions and potentially yield rich data bases

which generate further hypotheses.

Psychological research may also help to develop problem focused and action oriented

approaches to enhance gang prevention and gang intervention programs. As an example, if

uncertainty-identity factors are found to contribute significantly to youth motivations to join a

gang – then these could be added to gang prevention programs to focus on identity issues

with vulnerable youth. Also, as gang youth continuously enter penal systems it seems

erroneous that rehabilitation programs address their criminogenic needs without examining

the stem of those needs. For instance, it seems insufficient to address a gang member's anger

issues and hope that this will encourage them to give up their gang membership and

offending lifestyles. Without also addressing the loyalty, commitment and emotional

attachment that members feel for their gang - all potentially developed via the group

processes of gang membership - then only part of the problem will have been tackled within

treatment. As Pyrooz et al., (2010) note, gang members often continue to feel bound to their

gangs - even after leaving the group. Issues of friendship, support and personal identity are

group processes intertwined with gang membership and potentially derive from the group

processes that underpin that membership. With so little psychological involvement in gang

research, it is difficult to pinpoint an accurate psychology of group processes in gangs and,

without psychological input, it will be difficult to develop comprehensive and fully effective

interventions to reduce gang membership. To be truly effective, treatment and gang

prevention programs need to be informed by a fuller understanding of the extent, strength and

specific nature of the group processes that influence individual gang members. To achieve

this critical understanding of gang membership more psychological and group process

oriented gang research is vital.

Clearly a great deal of work is necessary before we can know the exact role of group

processes in gang membership specifically – or how membership in a gang facilitates social

cognitive development (and for that matter, mental ill health) but psychology has an

infrastructure, that so far remains largely inert in this area of research. As seasoned gang

researchers such as Klein, Short, Strodtbeck, Maxson - to name a few - have emphasized,

group processes lie at the heart of gang membership - and psychology has much to offer in

the context of group process research.

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