

**The Trajectory of Gang Membership:
The Desistance from a “Deviant Identity”**

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**A thesis submitted to the
Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
MA degree in Criminology**

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Abstract

The public acts of violence during the summer of 2012 in Toronto brought the theme of gangs back to the forefront in Canadian media coverage. As renewed debates argued old subject matters, our understanding of gangs was not able to diverge from its endless roundabout.

This paper reverses the study of gangs that has classically looked towards the gang as a collective to explain its sub-cultural delinquent and sometimes violent tendencies, and rather, it explores the individualized interpretation of gang membership from the perspective of four Latin-Canadian males from the Greater Toronto area. This study takes on the challenge of observing the trajectory of gang membership based on the first hand experiences of self-proclaimed ex-gang members and through an in-depth dialogue with these participants, ventures through the turning points that led these individual actors through the process of onset, commitment and desistance.

This exploration into the lived experiences of gang membership is seen through a Symbolic Interactionist lens and views gang membership as one of many identities that can actively be portrayed by the social being. In this perspective, the concepts of gangs and gang membership are described as a subjective experience completely open to interpretation, but guided by the flow of unique interactions that these individuals encountered within a variety of complex situations and environments. That which is being observed herein is the process of how the participants interacted with their existing environments and the circumstances produced by them, highlighting the momentous events that continuously defined the individuals understanding of their own self-concept as a gang member up until the point of non-membership.

What was observed by a dissection of the interviewee's accounts was that the onset of gang membership was influenced primarily by a feeling of disassociation and alienation which the participants actively sought to alleviate, whereby the idea of belonging to a gang offered the remedy. The aspect of commitment was shown to be focused more towards upholding the identity of gang membership and their reputation than towards the gang itself. Reinforcing the identity maintained the individual's social status and relevance amongst

their peers, solidifying the aspired identity of gang membership. Finally, the process of desistance surfaced once the gang member identity no longer seemed beneficial. Life threats, a re-emergence of the feeling of solitude, the experience of disloyalty and the acceptance of another identity as being more imperative were factors that separately influenced the move for the discontinuance for the projection of the gang member identity. Although the participants admit to and self proclaim ex-membership, they do nonetheless acknowledge that the gang mask could once again be put back on.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	vii
Chapter 1 – Introduction	1
Chapter 2 – <i>Wut up homie?</i> : Understanding the Participants	9
2.1 Latino-Canadian Experience	9
2.2 Ex-Members	11
2.3 What to Expect	12
Chapter 3 – <i>Check the M.O.</i> : Symbolic Interactionism	15
3.1 Self-Concept	18
Chapter 4 – <i>Rep yo ' set</i> : A Literary Review about Gangs and Gang Membership	24
4.1 Defining Gangs	24
4.2 Gang Membership	29
4.3 Risk Factors and Onset	32
4.4 Commitment	35
4.5 Desistance	37
Chapter 5 – <i>Hoodied and Masked up</i> : Methodology	43
5.1 Recruitment	43
5.2 Data Collection Face-to-Face Semi-Structured Interviews	51
5.3 Analysis	54
5.3.1 Narrative Analysis	54
5.3.2 Choosing of Narratives	56
5.3.3 Narrative Sub-Categories	57
5.3.4 Coding Frame: Construction of Meaning	58
Chapter 6 – <i>Know your role homie</i> : Discussion	60
6.1 Participant Stories	60
6.1.1 Alexis	61
6.1.2 Claudio	65
6.1.3 Arturo	69
6.1.4 Ernesto	73
6.2 What is a gang for them?	78

6.3 Turning Points	81
6.4 Onset.....	83
6.5 Commitment	87
6.6 Desistance	91
Chapter 7 – <i>Ride until the casket drops</i> : Conclusion	96
References	101

List of Appendices

APPENDIX A – Arizona State Gang Requirements

Acknowledgements

“What is gang membership?” “What do you mean by the trajectory of gang membership or gang membership as a process?” “Do you mean to say that gang members can just come and go from the gang as they please?”

These were a few of the questions that I encountered when I revealed to my family and peers of the academic journey that I was embarking - the writing of my master’s thesis. Truth be told, I was neither sure nor confident in how to respond to these questions at the time. For conversation’s sake I succeeded in sounding quite knowledgeable when I regurgitated some of the criminological theories that I had learned over the years. Yet, once I had finished my oratory concoction of Marxist ideals whisked with Durkheimian seasonings and peppered with contemporary citations, the polite responses of “oh...that’s interesting” were simply kind gestures of support and approval. I am sure though that my audience still remained as bewildered as I was to the true essence of my investigation.

To this regard, the selection of my thesis topic was trudging to say the least. I could not see the light at the end of the jungle-like expedition I had chosen to investigate; the foliage (represented by my research reading material) was extensive and proved to be extremely thick. Nevertheless, although at some points I reached high levels of fatigue, with the help and support of some very important people, I managed to remain goal focused and determined to proceed, and was able to clear out my academic path, highlighter as my machete.

Firstly, I would like to give a most sincere thank you to my thesis supervisor, Patrice Corriveau, without whom none of this would have been possible. I was completely at odds when I first began my Masters program as I found myself in an entirely new city and academic environment. As a new student to the University of Ottawa I was utterly unfamiliar with the faculty, which proved to be somewhat problematic when needing to approach my professors to ask if they would join me on my academic adventure. Nevertheless, I sincerely believe that I could not have fallen into better hands. I thank you for your encouragement and excitement into this research. Your perspective on the topic of gangs was not only insightful but also motivating. Our conversations always surged me with the energy that I

would often look back on when I found myself losing momentum. This has been a long road, and I thank you mostly for always keeping faith in me and in this project to reach this final point.

I would also like to take this time to thank my research participants. They entrusted me with personal accounts loaded with emotions and strong opinions that allowed for this research to flourish. Their perspectives were, for the purpose of this paper, brilliant, but also touched me on a personal level that enlightened me on a different reality that I had previously only read about or seen on the television. Hearing their stories – as it would be, from the horse’s mouth – has brought a new found appreciation for those who have lived and currently live through similar circumstances. If only the people who are affected in the same ways that my participants once were could be exposed to their stories, more people could feel the warmth of hope for better days.

It is equally important to mention those who have helped this research through funding. The Metropolis Group of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council helped alleviate an aspect to this research that does not otherwise get mentioned in the girth of the following pages. Doing research is a great experience and I am glad that I have decided to expand and share my knowledge, I only wish that someone would have made me more aware of the economic risk that furthering one’s knowledge could be. I remember always being told that school would bring me to great places, and of the amazing career prospects that it would provide, but somewhere down the line those same people forgot to mention that I would need a job in order to go to school. The Metropolis group helped me significantly in lessening that burden and allowed it to be more feasible to adequately compensate my research participants for their efforts.

Although many of my peers and family members may not indulge in reading this final product, they have still played a significant role in my ability to arrive to this point. I would like to thank my friends for never questioning my direction in continuing my education, as well for entertaining any and all of my rants regarding crime and gangs. Our debates forced me to consider a multitude of perspectives surrounding my chosen study topic which I believe has allowed for this research to be of a better rounded nature.

To my family, I thank you for your love and support and for your encouragement. You have taught me the necessary skills to endure this process as well as given me the independence (willingly or not), to learn on my own accord, for that I am forever grateful. My sometimes head strong determination can be overwhelming, and I thank you for your patience. Lastly, your installation of never accepting things at face value nourished my critical character which definitely came into significant use within the following pages. As you know, finishing this means a great deal to me, but does not contend with the love I feel for all of you.

Lastly I would like to give a special thank you to my fiancée, my rock. You have seen me at my lows and my highs throughout this whole process and have played if not the biggest role of support to me. You have also played the role of my secretary, helping me to meet deadlines and with the tedious administrative tasks that if it were not for you, would have only prolonged my final goal. I thank you for your patience with me, and for making sure that I saw this through. The times when quitting seemed like a viable option, you brought me back to centre and gave me that extra little push that I needed. I love you.

Chapter 1 – Introduction

The public acts of violence marked by the Eaton Centre and Danzig Street shootings in the summer of 2012 in Toronto re-sparked an upsurge in discussions about *gangs*, a topic that had previously subsided since Toronto's 1995 "summer of the gun". Regardless of the city's general downward trend in crime measured by the Toronto Police Service Statistics¹, gangs nonetheless re-established front page relevance in the city once again. The media sources were headlining such stories as: "Toronto slayings, shootings linked to battle for gang leadership" (CBC News, 2012) "Toronto gangs smaller, looser – but packing more heat" (Paperny, 2012). Seemingly, Torontonians were at odds with the apparent jump in street violence and were once again in search for a solution to the city's visible gang issue.

Rob Ford, the Mayor of Toronto at that time made a suggestion regarding how to deal with the issue of gang members when he publicly stated, "I want something to be done. I want these people out of the city. And I'm not going to stop. Not put 'em in jail, then come back and you can live in the city. No. I want 'em out of the city. Go somewhere else. I don't want 'em living in the city anymore" (Dale, 2012). Needless to say, such an erratic and implausible method, I believe, would not have proved very effective for the city of Toronto.

Jeff Pearce (2010) the author of "Gangs in Canada" summarizes what tends to typically be the most popular topics of discussion when it comes to gangs in Canada. As discussed, in Pearce's 2012 Toronto Star opinion piece entitled "Scarborough shootings renew tired old debates about gangs", he notes that the debates lean towards highlighting preventative versus proactive measures, the socio-economic disparities that exist in the city, and the effects of poverty along with the situational circumstances commonly faced by single parent families. On a surface level are the discussions about the lack of community services that exist, or the lack of funding provided to the community services existing already. More notably though, and one of Mayor Ford's top priorities at the time, were the measures taken to toughen the already "tough on crime" laws in order to curb what had re-surfaced as "Toronto's gang problem". In 2012, Pearce remarked that "these tedious clichés – poverty, drug laws, the notion that brazen violence is new – only clog intelligent

¹See http://www.torontopolice.on.ca/statistics/ytd_stats.php

discussion”.² In agreement with his statement I further suggest that the phenomenon of gangs appears to have reached a conceptually monotonous stand still and should abandon the parlance of the tedious clichés of reasoning that it has traditionally been subjected to. Additionally, I believe that an approach to the phenomenon from a new and different perspective with the ability to extend the existing conceptual boundaries would only serve to un-clutter and de-clog our understanding of the term *gang* to better match this concept’s evolutionary nature.

Generally speaking, the term gang denotes the notion of a group which, according to Public Safety Canada (2013), requires a minimum of three members in order to be considered a gang. Being that the gang is a group, it is of no surprise then that much of the leading research into this concept has had the tendency to direct its focus solely on the group element and not as much on the comprising individuals. Although I cannot be accredited with the originality of the ideas within this perspective, the accounts of the individual experiences of gang membership are nonetheless what have come to bloom as the main interest and basis of this study.

There are many different ways to view the study of gangs and when viewed in isolation of each other, they offer little more than a glimpse into this complex social phenomenon. For instance, we can try to define what a gang is, or we can consider the risk factors that may or may not be conducive to the starting and/or the entering of a gang. We can also assess the policies developed and implemented in order to deal with such risk factors and how to help our youth transition out of, or avoid gangs, and even count and generate statistical information with respect to gang activities to better analyze how a gang is structured and how they evolve. Yet, without the experiences of the individuals who partake in gangs; those united to bring this social phenomenon into existence, none of the aforementioned inquiries would be at all possible.

Instead of looking at the gang in order to explain the behavior of the individuals, I believe an investigation in reverse order may provide a unique conceptual perspective. By leading an investigation centered on the individual, the focus inevitably transforms from that of the experiences of the gang as a collective, to the more individualized aspect of the

²See

http://www.thestar.com/opinion/editorial_cartoon/2012/07/19/scarborough_shootings_renew_tired_old_debates_about_gangs.html

experiences of gang membership. By refocusing the analysis of gangs towards the individualized experience of gang membership we are better able to assert the intangibility of the concept of gangs. This is to say that this reversed perspective can better demonstrate how in this case, individuals actively create their own reality of gang membership, not based on a pre-conceived idea, but through a process of learning how to interact with their surrounding environments. As will be explained in greater detail throughout, although that which has evolved into our commonsensical understanding of the term *gang* is largely portrayed by the existing discourse, a better founded meaning may in fact rest most wholesomely upon the subjective experiences of those individual actors who have at one time or another perceived their reality as existing in the sphere of gang membership.

This being said, it should be noted that navigation through the experiences of gang membership is not unilateral, but multi-dimensional and as such, must consider an array of factors that add up to make up the individual experience. Not only does one have to consider the mass of particular events that have taken place throughout one's life that helped clear a path towards the propensity of gang membership, but also the personal thoughts, feelings and understandings of the 'Self' must also be considered to obtain a clearer view into the lived experiences of the gang member. An insider's perspective into this phenomenon can therefore illuminate the notion that gang membership is much more than a simple label obtained by the occasion of a ceremonious "jump-in" or stamped by the discretionary powers of the Criminal Justice System.

Extending this line of thinking, it is perceived herein that gang membership is not a destiny, nor does membership to a gang occur over night. On the other hand, gang membership should be understood as an identity, and as such, as requiring of the individual to undergo a rigorous and complex process which continuously tests the authority of the gang member identity to dominate one's character. This research has been designed to explore the unique trajectories of gang membership to identify the processes that occur which have the potential to render an individual to accept and portray the gang member identity. Specifically, this research has chosen to place the unraveling experiences of the Latino-Canadian male perspective at the forefront of this research to expand upon a more Canadian centered perspective of the Latino community. Each of the participant's stories will be different and the purpose herein is to compare and contrast the personalized accounts

of gang membership highlighting the differences and the important similarities that have occurred through the trajectory of entrance until the point of exit from the gang. In no manner does this research attempt to provide any conclusive truths about gangs and gang membership that can be easily generalized across all experiences of gang membership. Alternatively, by providing to the reader a glimpse into the lived experience of the self proclaimed ex-gang member, the intended aim of this research is purely examining in nature and is solely set out to identify the different trajectories of gang membership as it has been experienced by Latino-Canadian males residing in the Greater Toronto Area. If nothing more, the proceeding pages hope to appropriately expand upon the isolated and individualized perspectives of the trajectories of gang membership in order to contribute towards the future understandings of the gang phenomenon as a whole.

When examining gangs, scholars have put much effort towards attempting to establish a universally uniform definition of the term. Unfortunately to date, one has not yet been coined. This in part could be due to the fact that “most knowledge about gangs has been derived from data gathered by police gang units or from observational or case studies. Very little information has been derived from surveys or interviews with a general sample of youth participating in the gang subculture” as Esbensen, Huizinga and Weiher (1993:94) quite accurately note. Ultimately, if our informative sources do not expand further into the realm of those participating in the gang subculture, then we can only aspire to remain on the peripheries of a more substantial knowledge with regards to gangs.

A short personal anecdote accurately depicts this idea. As I was recruiting participants for this study I happened to explain to a potential participant that I was looking to do research on gangs. I informed him that I had done some extensive reading on the topic and was therefore cognizant of some of the issues surrounding gangs. In what I believed to be in humble fashion, and in order to come across as being able to relate to my potential participant, I attempted to explain that due to my keen interest and research that I was not entirely ignorant on the specific topic. Before I could further explain my intentions of the study he stopped me dead in my tracks and responded, “I’m sorry, and no offence, but unless you have lived the life, you are and will remain ignorant to what it is” (initial phone conversation with participant number 2).

Our ignorance or peripheral understanding of the topic may be one of the reasons as to why it has been so difficult to establish a universal definition of the term *gang*, or the inability to move away from the traditional explanations which have up to this point given the term its shape. Seemingly enough, we have not been looking at the right resources and consequently, not attributing enough merit to them.

Our concept of gang membership today seems to be informed mainly by the existing definitions of the term *gangs*, ones that focus significantly on criminal activity. This is to say that according to what is popularly believed – including amongst academics (Wortely, 2010; White & Mason, 2006; Decker & Kempf-Leonard, 1991; Ball & Curry, 1995) – what separates street gangs from any other informal grouping of individuals is their assumed participation in criminal activities. Nevertheless, Spergel (1995) and Sanchez-Jankowski (1991; 1994) both attest that criminal behavior within the universe of gangs has become less and less frequent, and that it is typically only a restricted number of individuals who will conduct themselves in a delinquent manner. It is my belief that if we could first further our understanding of what a gang member is or what gang membership means for the participants, perhaps then a more cohesive comprehension of the term gang can be attained.

The National Gang Centre³ categorizes gang-related legislation in the United States by State and uses a list of membership criteria, whereupon for example, a person must provide a self-proclamation of membership or meet at least two of the criteria from the list in order to be considered or be identified as a gang member. Such identification methods can prove to be quite inaccurate and indicative of discriminatory profiling. Take for example the seven criteria under the gang-related legislation in the State of Arizona (Appendix “A”). If one is required to meet only two criteria as indicated, an individual can be deemed a gang member simply by having tattoos, clothing and/or colours attributed as belonging to a gang. Although it has been noted that some gangs do use specific tattoos or colours as identifiers, not everyone who meets these criteria are gang members or gang affiliated. One would suggest that if this were true, the perceived gang problem would be much worse than suspected.

Nevertheless, for the purpose of this research and as to not be muddled in the ambiguity and fluidity of what are the existing definitions, we must establish some sort of

³ See <http://www.nationalgangcenter.gov>

parameters with regards to what will be discussed in terms of gang membership herein. This investigation will assume a Symbolic Interactionist perspective and assess the notion of *gang membership* as a certain role and identity that the individual draws from in order to guide an appropriate behaviour for the present circumstances in which he finds himself. As White (2008) identified, “not all their lives were spent in the ‘gang’...identity is multi-layered and complex” (pp. 153 – 154). This supports the Symbolic Interactionist perspective in the existence of a multitude of identities or roles that a single individual may act out, indicating that identities are a fluid and plural notion. Therefore, self-identification of gang membership does not signify that this one identity is the only identity that an individual has influencing his/her behaviour. Essentially, this paper will examine how gang membership as a process leads individuals to self-identify, at one point in their lives, as a gang member as well as the events and motives that fostered an eventual disassociation from such an identity. In continuation of setting the parameters in the Symbolic Interactionist tone, further preliminary distinctions are in order and would seem most appropriate to outline herein the terms *Deviant* and *Sub-culture* as to clearly indicate what is purported by the usage of these terms throughout as to not leave them in an amorphous state and exposed to misinterpretation.

Deviant is a fully loaded term and can be used to describe those whose behaviors tend to exist outside of the scope of the accepted societal norms, or that are taboo. Generally when applied, the term *Deviant* (similar to that of *gang*), holds a more negative undercurrent as an adjective and oftentimes denotes people who are criminally involved. Although this paper will be working within this confine, it will nonetheless assume deviance to be a subjective experience. To paraphrase Becker’s (1963) work in *Outsiders, Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*, any act is not deviant in and of itself, but only deemed as such by the dominant groups – those who make the rules. This is to say, for example, that the “criminal” is not inherently “criminal” but given that label by the governing elite and by those who subscribe to the status quo and its standardized norms. An act that is understood as deviant in one circumstance can be completely acceptable in another circumstance.

Furthermore, as Becker (1963) specifies,

...the common-sense assumption [is] that the deviant act occurs because some characteristic of the person who commits it makes it necessary or inevitable that he should. Scientists do not ordinarily question the label 'deviant' when it is applied to particular acts or people but rather take it as given. In so doing, they accept the values of the group making the judgment. It is easily observable that different groups judge different things to be deviant. This should alert us to the possibility that the person making the judgment of deviance, the process by which that judgment is arrived at, and the situation in which it is made may all be intimately involved in the phenomenon of deviance. To the degree that the common-sense view of deviance and the scientific theories that begin with its premises assume that acts that break rules are inherently deviant and thus take for granted the situations and processes of judgment, they may leave out an important variable (Becker, 1963, p. 4-5).

This piece then indicates ultimately that outsiders (or deviants) are seen as those who break group rules but also questions, what are the governing rules? As will be further elaborated, people belong to many groups and thus change their behaviour accordingly. On this note Becker accurately asks “[a] person may break the rules of one group by the very act of abiding by the rules of another group. Is he, then, deviant?” (Becker, 1963, p.8). This idea of a multiplicity of groups brings us to the needed distinction of the following term; *Sub-culture*.

From a Criminology point of view, a *Sub-Culture* is any group where the values developed therein are distinct from those of the dominant group (Cohen, 1955; Cohen & Short, 1958; Thrasher, 1927; Cohen, 1972; Cloward & Ohlin, 1966). Let it be noted that not every sub-culture is perceived as criminal⁴, yet for the purpose of this study and for the majority of criminological studies, the groups being referred to as sub-cultural have developed criminally labelled methods which set them apart from the dominant society. Furthermore, an individual is not socially mandated to belong to only one sub-cultural group and as was previously noted by Becker (1963), people do in fact belong to a wide variety of groups while also participating within dominant society as well, their behaviour constantly adapting and taking shape along with the unique circumstance and the specific set of rules and values that pertain to that particular group. Therefore, for the length of this paper gangs as a *Sub-Culture* should be viewed as not being inherently criminal, but as having been

⁴For example the Mods as studied by Cohen (1972) or as a more recent example, the Hipsters of today, whose form of differentiating themselves is mainly exemplified by their appearance predominantly expressed through their unique style of dress and haircuts.

labelled as such by the lawmakers and actively being enforced as such by the Criminal Justice System. As a result, the fear provoking notion of gangs as a “criminal group” has become the public and the common-sense understanding which contours the term today, even though self-identified “gang members” may not interpret their actions or behaviour as being criminal.

Remaining within these boundaries clearly set above, the focus of this research is upon the process of the trajectory towards the desistance from a deviant identity (which will notably be discussed more in depth). This process captures a specific time span within a life history which within itself follows a story-like structure. It has a beginning which is the initial acceptance of the identity, or entry point; a climactic middle, the point of saliency, reinforcement or commitment to the identity; and an end, or for the purpose of this paper, the desistance from the gang member identity. In order for the story to proceed, the identity inevitably encounters transition points which alter the directional path from beginning to middle to the end, and it is precisely this that this investigation will explore.

Expanding on this idea, one would suggest that contrary to what is popularly professed through various media outlets and information mediums, exiting a gang is possible by means other than the “ride or die” method, or simply put, by death or incarceration. Gang membership is but one of many identities that can be acquired and acted upon by the individual actor, whereby the process of desisting from this particular deviant identity is highly dependent on the events that occur in the individual’s life experience. The commitment to such an identity is weakened by a re-established commitment to another identity more suiting to the individual’s aspirations in the present moment.

Before we proceed any further, it is especially important to note here that gang membership should not be viewed as synonymous with criminal behavior. The simple idea that people can transition away from identifying themselves as a gang member does not mean that all deviant or criminal activity/behavior will also cease. This is an investigation into the individual experience of gang membership and the desistance from this identity, not to be confused with the study of the desistance from criminal activity, which is commonly associated to gang activity.

Chapter 2 – *Wut up homie?: Understanding the Participants*

2.1 Latino-Canadian Experience

The specific aim of this research is to draw information from the accounts of Hispanic/Latino-Canadian males residing in the Greater Toronto Area. Being that I myself am partly of Latin American descent, the perspectives allocated to this sociological, racial and cultural axis has always resonated strongly within me and has peaked a sense of intense interest worthy of exploration and understanding on a personal level. Furthermore, the motivations for studying the Hispanic/Latino-Canadian perspective are also influenced by a seemingly lack of information that currently exists on Latino gangs and gang members in general. As was noted by Miller, Barnes and Hartley, (2011):

Although gangs have been at the centre of research conducted by criminologists and urban sociologists since the early 20th century, virtually no studies of Hispanic gang membership have been conducted...As a result, the multitude of known correlates of gang membership has yet to be explored systematically, along with other germane factors hypothesized to be important for Hispanic gang membership (p. 335).

Granted that the author's research and this statement is specific to an American context, it is nonetheless believed that it accurately depicts the Canadian context as well by example of the seemingly lack of Canadian specific information available on the Latino-Canadian gang paradigm.

This apparent lack of information can in part be derivative of the low count of gang participation found amongst the Latino population in Canada as a whole in comparison to the United States. Data from the U.S. National Gang Centre website posits that Hispanic/Latinos hold a majority of gang membership within the total ethnic/racial makeup of gangs at 46 percent in both large and small cities and suburban counties alike⁵. Contrastingly, in 2002 the total count in all of Canada amassed a meager 6% in comparison, Windsor being host to the majority of the Latino gang members listed amongst other major Canadian cities (two gangs, amounting a total of approximately 40 people) (Chettleburg, 2003; 2007). Considering these figures, it is suggested that making a distinction between the

⁵ See <http://www.nationalgangcenter.gov/Survey-Analysis/Demographics>

Hispanic/Latino-Canadian and the Hispanic/Latino-American youth gang experience is important as it would appear that the degree of gang membership of Latinos in Canada does not compare to that of our American counterparts (or has at least not been as thoroughly reported). Unfortunately, a negative perception and an assumed correlation to the gang sub-culture and that of Latino-Canadian culture can potentially be attributed to influences derived from an over representation of a predominantly Chicano scope by various informative and entertainment networks reporting south of our border.

This being said, the importance of making this study a culturally specific one is not meant to allude towards any specific generalizing conclusions regarding race and gangs, but instead to raise awareness and to provoke further research into a Canadian specific realm of research, inclusive of all of the varying factors that contribute to the making of the Canadian cultural mosaic. This paper also aspires to shed light onto the direct accounts of those who represent the Hispanic/Latino-Canadian experience and attempt to incite the need for a better understanding of possible crime/race correlations. To venture into studies of race and crime is quite complicated as our concept of race, similar to that of gangs, also appears to be quite malleable and fluid. We must ask ourselves for instance, how is it that race is categorized in Canada? Or is race simply a socially constructed identifier and an assumed identity dependent upon how one has been socialized? I feel that a hypothetical example at this moment would better demonstrate the existing notion of the ambiguity that race can create, thus requiring more careful consideration when correlating crimes to race.

If for instance I committed and had been charged of a criminal offence, would I have statistically been considered Caucasian because I have light eyes and fair skin? Because my mother is from Belgium, I speak French and my last name can be traced back to Ireland? Or contrastingly, would I be considered Hispanic/Latino because I am a first generation Canadian whose father is Chilean and have acquired Chilean citizenship, Spanish also having been the first language that I learned as a child? Or, would I be considered Caribbean-Canadian because my near ancestry is traced back to Jamaican lineage, while many family members of mine are considered to be visibly black?

Considering the ambiguity of the element of race, this study's focus is not designed to offer any conclusions on the Hispanic/Latino perspective as a whole, but will instead

emphasize the need of a more in depth look into the Hispanic/Latino-Canadian experience. It is an attempt to separate, and further distinguish itself from a dominating misrepresentation attributing the Latino-American or Chicano perspective as the all-encompassing Hispanic/Latino perspective. This research is simply a rudimentary attempt to bring to surface a Canadian specific inquiry into gang membership in a sub-category that in my opinion has to date, not received considerable attention.

2.2 Ex-Members

The specification of ex-membership is a key factor for this research. Ex-membership denotes that the individual has gone through the full trajectory of onset, commitment and desistance and can therefore recount on the entire experience, whereas current or potential members cannot. Furthermore, ex-membership can be somewhat of a difficult categorization to establish. People looking to exit gangs do not simply fill out an application for discontinuance of membership and once signed and stamped, become approved and recognized as ex-members by one and all. This is to say that although an individual may go through a process that leads to their eventual personal and external recognizance of an exit from a gang, this is not to say that members of rival gangs and/or the Criminal Justice System also distinguish them as no longer being members. Since this research is working along the guise that gang membership is one of many roles that an individual can fulfill, and being so, a unique and subjective experience to the individual who plays the role, ex-membership amongst the participants for this reason was established through the element of self-identification. This is to say that the participants were not subjected to any procedure or line of questioning to ultimately qualify them as such, nor was a background or criminal check performed to determine their gang membership status.

The merits of the self –identification of membership will be further elaborated later on in the paper, yet for the purpose of understanding the participants, it is imperative to recognize primarily that these participants were selected on their own will to contribute and on the basis of their auto-admittance of being ex-members, regardless of their level of participation, (documented or not). This research is designed to explore the trajectory of gang membership as it was personally experienced by the individual, and for this the

importance rests solely in the capacity for the individual to identify as no longer being part of a gang. This being said, the exemption of the element of external validation, (the need for others to place and accept any one individual into a particular role), is unique to this research. Alternatively and beyond the scope of this paper, external validation of a particular role or identity is paramount to the individual in reaching a level of understanding of the *Self*. External validity acts as the aorta as it carries the rich information through the heart of an individual's identity, pumping it with both positive and negative reinforcement which can either solidify or weaken the identity or role that the individual is faced with fulfilling. As social beings in a variety of complex social environments, we tend to inform our perceptions of ourselves based on what we expect others to think of us and behave accordingly.

2.3 What to Expect

There were three fundamental readings that were done previous to the selection of my participants which allowed me to anticipate some of the difficulties that I could face while doing my research. The first of which was a book by Sudhir Venkatesh (2008) titled, *Gang Leader for a Day: A Rogue Sociologist Takes to the Streets*. His account of his ethnographic study into poverty in the Robert Taylor housing projects in Chicago was a form of preparation for me to be aware and open minded towards some of the information regarding the harsh realities of the individuals that I would become privy to throughout my own research. It allowed me to understand that in order to better comprehend the personal experiences of the trials and tribulations of my participants, that it is paramount to abandon my personal experiential filters as best as possible by placing myself in the participant's shoes. Venkatesh (2008) was successful in doing this as he was able to integrate himself and become an insider into the surroundings that he was studying, experiencing first-hand what it was like to be a gang leader. As interesting as it would have been to be able to mimic his research methods, two other books inspired my decision to choose to research gangs in a manner that eliminated much of the risk attached to "going native" within the gang sub-culture.

Robbing Drug Dealers: Violence Beyond the Law by Bruce Jacobs (2000) and *Burglars on the Job* by Richard Wright and Scott Decker (1994) provided ideas that were

more conducive towards the type of research that I wanted to perform. These books complimented the difficulties that I, as an outsider to a specific sub-culture, would eventually encounter by seeking interviews from people who have resided within a particular underworld. These books similar in study, described certain steps and procedures necessary to be taken in order to infiltrate a body of knowledge not readily available to the academic world. Reading these three books allowed me not only to anticipate and troubleshoot some of the hurdles that I would confront in my participant recruitment, but also allowed me to formulate a persona and a character that I would need as a researcher, not only to attract a typified respondent, but to also allow them to feel comfortable enough in order to divulge information otherwise locked away from probing sources.

Further readings were also useful to help the evolution of what is now the focus of this research. Theses readings are not typical of what is described as “scholarly material”, but were nonetheless perhaps the most insightful in allowing me to understand the trajectory of a deviant identity. These books were very similar to what I would later collect as my interview based data from my participants. They were autobiographical accounts of people who were totally submerged and consumed by a deviant and delinquent identity, who told their own personal stories of change.

One of the first books that offered insight into the trajectory of a criminal identity was a book written by Piri Thomas (1997) entitled *Down These Mean Streets*. The author accounts his own experiences as a first generation American living in New York shortly after the Great Depression. *Always Runnin* by Luis J. Rodriguez (1995) is a book which provided me with a window into the life of a troubled Mexican-American growing up in Los Angeles, and included vivid descriptions of the difficult circumstances faced by many newcomers to the U.S. *Monster: the autobiography of an L.A. gang member* by Sanyika Shakur (2004), *Makes Me Wanna Holler* by Nathan McCall (1995) and *Soul on Ice* by Eldridge Cleaver (1968) are further examples of literature that helped shape my investigation by learning about their strong personal examples of the process that is often endured by individuals who have managed to escape their criminal identities.

The intention of mentioning these books is not to give a summary of them, as it would ruin the mystique for one to encounter these characters personally. On the other hand,

it is important to mention that although these authors lived separate and distinct experiences, their stories are very much alike to each other and to those of my participants. The authors, over a trajectory of time managed to reach a level of introspection which ignited their conscious understanding of the events that unraveled their personal process of change from the acceptance of one identity to another. Through their stories they revealed extremely personal events that played not only as turning points, but also as precursors for the subjective realization of a need for change. Without expecting it, the subject of these books would become exactly what I was in search of when the decision to write my thesis was made. They paved the way for a better understanding of the scripts I would later hear from the research participants. Their vivid accounts into the true stories prepared me to look beyond the surface information that was given by the participants and realize that many inferences lay in the depths of the scripts that are told and that the subjective understanding of oneself can be a very dark and desolate place.

Having read these books I was able to feel confident in the conclusions that I would later extrapolate from the participant scripts because the author's accounts acted as a guide through similar trajectories. Although those of the participants' of this research are not a mirror image of those told in the autobiographies, the processes of desistance that they encountered are easily comparable.

What is more, it became very clear to me through these books which theoretical framework I thought best fit the intentions of this paper. The stories were very descriptive of the specific circumstances that they faced, who they faced them with and all of their personal thoughts that occurred at every moment, including their reasoning and rationalizations. Although it was not openly expressed within the pages of these stories, I was able to find many examples of how Symbolic Interaction explained their behaviour and more precisely, the process towards the desistance of a deviant identity. It is for this reason that this theoretical framework will act as the frame from which this research will be looked at.

Chapter 3 –*Check the M.O.*: Symbolic Interactionism

As already noted, the focus of this research is to explore the trajectory of gang membership which, in the context of this paper is to be understood as the desistance from a “deviant identity”. By studying the trajectory we will evaluate the importance of the transition points experienced by the individuals and assess the process towards desisting from the identity in question. In order to do this, I believe that a qualitative approach would be best suited to allow me to examine the phenomenon of gang membership as explained through the subjective experiences of those who have self-identified themselves at one time or another, as a gang member.

The epistemological stance taken herein will be that of the Symbolic Interactionist perspective, meaning that it is through this lens that I shall be investigating sense making and the significances attributed to the participant’s notion of reality in respect to gangs and gang membership. The Symbolic Interactionist approach assumes meanings and reality to be principally arrived at through a process of socialization and interaction. In the case of this investigation, meanings derived from the information divulged by the respondents will be arrived at through a rapport building process and the back and forth interaction between the researcher and the respondent. Another way to understand this method is as a co-construction of meaning, whereby the process of sense making is achieved through the interplay of both the participant’s and the investigator’s subjectivity. The subjective filters inherent in both researcher and participant are essential for the purpose of managing a level of meaning to better arrive at a clear understanding of what the process of gang membership is on a personal level. This theoretical approach therefore seems to be the most effective manner of structuring the context of this study which relies heavily on the importance resting on the subjectivity of the participants, and how it affects the ways that these individuals come to comprehend their reality regarding gang membership.

Bred out of the Chicago School of Sociology (Charon, 2010), Symbolic Interactionism as a pragmatic theoretical concept provides an outlook into how individuals within society – social beings – are consciously and unconsciously in a continuous process of interpreting their environment while also establishing and acting out roles and identities in

congruence to their interpretations. According to Matsueda and Heimer (1997), Symbolic Interactionism looks at society as “an ongoing process of social transactions [whereby] transactions are built up by participants’ adjustments to each other and their situations” (Matsueda & Heimer, 1997, p. 163). Charon (2010) looks at the complexities of the theory as a whole and breaks down Symbolic Interaction into five guiding principles: 1) The human being must be understood as a social person; 2) The human being must be understood as a thinking being; 3) Humans define the situation they are in; 4) The cause of human action is the result of what is occurring in our present situation and; 5) Human beings are described as active beings in relation to their environment (Charon, 2010, p. 29).

This theoretical concept does however have many variations⁶ to explain social order and human behaviour but recognizes that measures of human behaviour cannot be precisely predicted or determined (Ulmer & Spencer, 1999), and while measures of probability can be high, as “high as this probability might be, one cannot assume the outcome will follow the same pattern the next moment simply because it happened this way the moment before” (Shalin, as cited in Ulmer & Spencer, 1999, p. 105). This is in due part because Symbolic Interactionism recognizes a dialectic relationship between the individual’s biological conditions and social environments which is a distinct entity for every social actor on a strictly individual level which makes it difficult to accurately predict criminal trajectories beyond a simple level of probability (Ulmer & Spencer, 1999). The focus herein will thus not rest in the attempt to make predictions regarding criminal propensities or trajectories, but instead to analyze the changes that constantly take place which ultimately affect the life-course trajectories. As science is normally fashioned with finding trends and a level of continuity amongst them, Symbolic Interactionism addresses quite nicely Heraclitus’ notion that “the only constant is change”. It is therefore believed that for the purpose of this paper Symbolic Interaction will provide a lucid perspective by which to look at the individual’s experiences while simultaneously considering the combining efforts of one’s biology and social environments that guide such experiences and the changes of identity that take place within them.

⁶ For summaries see Denzin (1992); Hammersley (1989); Meltzer, Petras & Reynolds (1975); Plummer (1991).

Symbolic Interactionism notes that identities⁷ are neither static nor singular. An individual can in fact play the role⁸ of many different identities (Charon, 2010), some of which are more salient than others and as such, are more indicative of the individual's core sense of self at a specific period of time. Mastueda and Heimer (1997) write that "[t]he most important, salient, or prominent identities are those that correspond to roles that have received greater investments by the individual" (p. 171), however one would suggest that these are always subject to change. Identities are dependent upon the different environments that we encounter and socialize within, and thus Symbolic Interaction provides insightful explanations as to how changes to one's sense of self allows us to see the world differently and interchangeably, how our interactions with the world can also change (Charon, 2010). Charon (2010) notes that as social beings, people constantly interact with their environment and conceptualize how they should behave according to the situation they are offered within the present moment. Charon (2010) writes that "the human being interacts, uses perspectives, therefore defines situations, acts according to what goes on in the present situation, and is active not passive. The actor is perceived to be constantly changing as he or she goes along" (Charon, 2010, p. 39). An example of this can be borrowed from Malcolm X's (1965) autobiographical account wherein he explains his processes of transformation from a petty criminal enduring the racial stigmatization marked by the era of his youth and adolescence to (after time spent in jail), an educated individual dedicated to battling the injustices fostered within a society informed by racist social norms existing at the time. Subsequently, as he committed himself towards achieving social justice his perspective on how to achieve his notion of justice changed from one involving violent measures to a more peaceful approach. Highlighting a particular event which caused him to change his perspective and as was also noted by Charon (2010), Malcolm (1965) wrote:

It was in the Holy World that my attitude was changed, by what I experienced there, and by what I witnessed there, in terms of brotherhood-not just brotherhood towards me, but brotherhood between all men, of all nationalities and complexions, who were there. And now that I am back in America, my attitude here concerning white people has to be governed by

⁷ "Identity is the name we call ourselves. It is socially recognized and validated. It is usually the name we announce to others that tells them who we are as we are acting" (Charon, 2010, p. 84).

⁸ According to Myers and Spencer (2006), a role is "a set of norms that define how people in a given social position ought to behave" (p. 117).

what my black brothers and I experience here, and what we witness here-in terms of brotherhood. (p. 368)

The autobiographical account of Malcolm X (1965) reveals how we as social actors are continuously interpreting and interacting with our environments through a dramaturgical performance (Goffman, 1959) of different roles in order to assess an appropriate mode of action towards achieving our intended goals within the unique circumstances we may find ourselves.

The theories and ideas that have been incorporated into this theoretical concept are extensive in their aim to explain the individual and human behaviour but, specific to this paper, the use of the Symbolic Interactionist approach will be used as an aid to identify within the participant's narratives how these individuals came to embrace and eventually desist from the gang member identity. While considering the five basic principles of Symbolic Interactionism as aforementioned, this study will focus on the concepts of *Identity*, the *Self*, the *I* and the *Me* as well as that of *Reference Groups* in order to come about a strong interpretation of the trajectory of gang membership.

3.1 Self-Concept

Each of the abovementioned concepts are intricately woven together and cannot be sufficiently explained alone without requiring the description of the others for clarity, I have therefore decided to incorporate a more general sub-heading for this section in order to adequately explain these concepts, which together combine to make up what is the Self-Concept.

I have come to understand the interconnectivity of these ideas as having a specific relationship. Briefly, the *Self* is achieved through a continuous process which is attained only through the act of socialization⁹ and represents the over-encompassing and stable entity that describes the individual, otherwise, the “framework through which we view and judge our own actions and, eventually, make sense of who we are” (O’Brien, 2006, p. 237). Our sense of self is influenced primarily by the array of *Identities* which we perform which are “subject

⁹“Socialization is the process of learning gesture, cues, and expectations that enable us to engage in successful impression management” (O’Brien, 2006, p. 237).

to considerable change and variation, depending on the situation and the audience” (O’Brien, 2006, p. 237) we are presented with. The *I* and the *Me* are sub-categories of the *Self* that act as a process of internal deliberation in the mind on how to act at the present moment. The appropriateness of each action which is deliberated is essentially influenced by our *Reference Groups* which can consist of real and/or fictional characters. Mead (1934) for instance wrote:

...it is where one does respond to that which he addresses to another and where the response of his own becomes a part of his conduct, where he not only hears himself but responds to himself, talks and replies to himself as truly as the other person replies to him, that we have behaviour [sic] in which the individuals become objects to themselves (p. 251 in O’Brien, 2006).

This statement describes the *Self* as a social object that begins to take form through the interaction “which is directed not only to others but also to the individual himself” (Mead, p. 251, 1934, in O’Brien, 2006) This is to say that through our ability to interact internally as thinking beings, the self becomes an object manifest outside of our physical existence. The concept of the *Self* as a social object is important for the theory of Symbolic Interactionism as it allows for the individual to assess and interpret their own actions as well as to be able to choose a performance or identity that is deemed most appropriate for the individual considering their present circumstances (Charon, 2010; Goffman, 1956). Furthermore, Demo (1992) describes the *Self* or *Self-Concept* as the more stable sense we hold of ourselves but realizes at the same time that our *Self-Concept* is best described as “a moving baseline with fluctuations across situations and life stages” (Demo, 1992, p. 304), emphasizing that as we are social actors, our core understanding of who we are is highly dependent on the social definitions that we encounter in our daily lives and the identities we assume in order to respond to our environments.

An *Identity*, such as that of the gang member, is one of many masks that we can occupy to not only describe ourselves to ourselves, but also as a means to convey an appearance towards an audience and to the outside environment that we are constantly interacting with. Although we may have a variety of masks from which to choose from for any given situation, not all of them become part of our self-concept. Those that do become aspects of our core selves are those that receive positive reinforcement and role support from

people whose perspective and opinions have become meaningful to us (Becker, 1960). The more positive reinforcement we receive, the more frequently we may present a specific identity which will eventually become strongly rooted as an identifier of our *Self-Concept* (O'Brien, 2006). Yet, depending on our interactions, and as was evidenced by the Malcolm X example, identities can change over time, reflecting that the *Self* is a continuous process (Charon, 2010). Additionally, identities are better described as a work in progress (Demo, 1992). Self-images/identities are "subject to constant change, revision, editing and updating as a function of variations in situation and situational demands" (Burke as cited in Demo, 1992, p. 305) which may oscillate in and out of the individual's *Self-Concept*. Yet, the more one refers to a specific identity in various circumstances, the more one commits to a role (Becker, 1960) or that the identity becomes habitualized and "so automatic that people fail to notice the extent to which they themselves engage in these performances" (O'Brien, 2006, p. 238). Matsueda and Heimer (1997) describe the usually unconscious process of how one develops a level of commitment to their chosen identities when they write:

Identities are built up fundamentally through ongoing processes of interactions: through participation in organized groups leading to recurrent role-taking involving those groups, commitments to group roles are built up, and corresponding identities established. The identity becomes more salient or prominent, increasing the likelihood that it will be the basis of future behavior [sic], in part because the corresponding behaviours [sic] will become habitualized, and in part because the identity becomes relevant to an increasingly broader range of situations (p. 171).

Before these identities can become routinized and emerge as part of the core *Self-Concept*, the individual must make a conscious decision about which role to take on in the varying circumstances that arise from the environment and how to perform the role. This process is done in a conversation with the *Self* between the *I* and the *Me*. As noted above, as social objects, humans have the capacity to assess their own thoughts, feelings and actions and to manage the impressions we deem fit for the situation at hand. O'Brien (2006) believes that we "watch our own performances from the position of an overseer and attempt to bring our behaviour into line with the expectations we have learned to associate with the situation" (O'Brien, 2006, p. 239). Piri Thomas' (1997) personal account as written in *Down These Mean Streets* tells the story of a young boy of Puerto Rican and Cuban decent growing up in New York City's Spanish Harlem in 1928. As the story unfolds the reader learns about the

author's experiences with drugs, youth gangs and criminal activities which landed him a jail sentence. Through the experiences he faced on the street and in institutionalized surroundings, the story reveals the author's transformation towards someone dedicated to turning youth away from lives of crime. Following the author's accounts of his personal trajectory, the story holds various examples of how the *I* and the *Me* deliberate to arrive at a mode of action dependent upon the social being's interaction with the present environment. The following is a prime example of such a deliberation:

As the moving van rolled to a stop in front of our new building, number 109, we were all standing there, waiting for it – Momma, Poppa, Sis, Paulie, James, José, and myself. I made out like I didn't notice the cats looking us over, especially me – I was gang age. I read their faces and found no trust, plenty of suspicion, and a glint of rising hate. I said to myself, these cats don't mean nothin'. They're just nosy. But I remembered what had happened to me in my old block, and that it had ended with me in the hospital. This was a tough looking block. That was good, that was cool; but my old turf had been tough, too. I'm tough, a voice within said. I hope I'm tough enough. I am tough enough. I've got mucho Corazón, I'm king wherever I go. I'm a killer to my heart. I not only can live, I will live, no punk out, no die out, walk bad; be down, cool breeze, smooth. My mind raced, and thoughts crashed against each other, trying to reassemble themselves into a pattern of rep. I turned slowly and with eyelids half-closed I looked at the rulers of this new world and with a cool shrug of my shoulders I followed the movers into the hallway of number 109 and dismissed the coming war from my mind (Thomas, 1997, pp. 47 – 48).

The *I* can be understood as the part of the self that wishes to act on more of an instinctual and impulsive level, to do things because it is what will create the most amount of gratification at that moment. The *Me* on the other hand is the part of the *Self* that is more reflective and assesses the desired act of the *I* while trying to bring it in line with the cultural expectations (O'Brien, 2006). Thomas' (1997) *I* and *Me* were deliberating as to how to act in the circumstances of his family arriving to a new neighbourhood. His *I* was telling the *Core-Self* that he had to choose the image of a fighter and to create the impression that he had a high level of bravado in an effort to communicate with the kids from the neighbourhood that he had heart, and was worthy of belonging to the neighbourhood. The *Me* on the other hand assessed the situation of the *I*'s inclination to go fight and opted that it was inappropriate to do so at the time given, as he was in the presence of his parents and younger siblings. Here the *Me* overrode the decision to take on the self-image of a fighter, as to not act in a fashion

of disdain in the eyes of his family members. Later on in the story though, Thomas' (1997) *Me* accords with his *I* and fights the boys of his new neighbourhood (out of the sight of his family), in order to establish himself within the group in a way that was culturally acceptable amongst them.

Reference Groups are the important elements that the *I* and the *Me* require as a means to measure suitable paths of action while also defining such actions as well as our beliefs and values (Shibutani, 1961 in O'Brien, 2006, p. 257). Cooley (1983) proposes that we are able to learn about ourselves by watching how others react to us, and thus wrote "I am not who you think I am; and I am not who I think I am; I am what I think you think I am" to emphasize the idea that we draw ideas of ourselves from how we perceive others to perceive us. According to O'Brien (2006), based from Cooley's (1983) piece titled *Looking-Glass Self*,

Much like looking into a mirror, if we perceive someone as viewing our actions with admiration, then we feel pride. If we perceived them as viewing us with disdain, we feel mortification. Through these 'reflected appraisals,' we gain information from others about ourselves and our actions (p. 249).

We acquire *Reference Groups* by socializing in many different groups (with our work colleagues, with our families, with our church groups etc.) wherein we share perception with each, and each adding to our perception of *Self* as we interact with these groups. We are able to modify our actions by foreseeing the outcome of our actions and the impact they will have towards our *Reference Groups*, those who set the standard for the appropriateness/inappropriateness for a particular action. This is also to say that certain perspectives that we hold when interacting with one group may not remain consistent beyond the boundaries of the social interaction with that group, or as Charon (2010) acknowledges, "those who matter to us become a complex mixture of generalized others, with separate social worlds or Reference Groups whose particular views become important in one situation and then cease to become important in another" (p. 76). With respect to Piri Thomas' (1997) example used above, Thomas' inaction to fight when he first felt the threatening glares of the neighbourhood boys was because he measured the level of dissatisfaction that he would have received from his family members whose values and beliefs did not coincide with his urge to fight. Furthermore, when not in the company of his

family, the values held by his peers differed and thus he had to act in accordance to the street codes by fighting as a means to attain acceptance within his new environment. Furthermore, since many individuals interact within different categorized groups (such as race and gender) and sub-cultures, they tend to have many different *Reference Groups*. It is no wonder then that the opinions and perspectives of people who come to interact vary significantly.

Further complicating the issue is that *Reference Groups* can come to encompass real or fictitious groups and characters and do not always hold a proximal relationship with the person whose actions are informed by them. What is noteworthy here though is that no matter the *Reference Group*, they tend to exert a strong influence on how people see the world, how they see themselves and the choices of action that they make (Shibutani, 1961).

Chapter 4 – *Rep yo' set*: A Literary Review about Gangs and Gang Membership

This portion of the paper will not only bring to light and review some of the important literary contributions that have been made to the study of gangs, but will also give the reader a sense of my thought process which allowed me to arrive at the intended focus for this investigation. Most of the material reviewed acknowledges that the study of gangs has not yet reached a level of maturity and that there exists some limitations within the conceptual frameworks used to study gangs. Furthermore, they (as I do) encourage the required continuance of the study in order for it to evolve alongside this phenomenon's ever changing existence. Needless to say, the numbers of studies on the topic are growing exponentially as more and more cities like the city of Toronto seek adequate measures on how to understand and control the trend of gangs. By allowing the reader to follow my mental mapping as I cut through only a fraction of the studies that exist, I hope to precisely define the boundaries of this study as to not lose sight of the intended focus. This portion of the paper will exemplify how in order to hone in on the exact targeted subject matter; I had to first work through the density of the concept of gangs in order to reach my point of clarity.

4.1 *Defining Gangs*

Proceeding forward, I found it most appropriate as a starting point to establish, or at least borrow a definition for the purpose of this research. It had quickly become clear to me that amidst the abundance of literature that exists on the topic, a clear understanding of what a gang is has not been reached (Decker & Kempf-Leonard, 1991; Winfree et al. 1992; Ball & Curry, 1995; Esbensen et al. 2001; Sanchez-Jankowski, 2008; White, 2008; Corriveau, 2009; Wortley, 2010). The term gang is not a new concept as we can date the study of gangs back to Frederick Thrasher's (1927) study of 1,313 gangs in Chicago. Nevertheless, after all the research that has been dedicated to gangs afterwards, this concept still remains an elusive, fluid and ambiguous one. To date, there is no consensus on the term *gang* by scholars, the Justice System or by the public (Ball & Curry, 1995).

By taking a closer look at the existing debates regarding the definition it can be said that a conclusive and uniform definition has not yet been attained due to the ample variations

of methodological and theoretical lenses that gangs have been looked through. There are a variety of theories that have been used to explain gangs (Wood & Alleyne, 2010), and have been inspected under many microscopic lenses, anywhere from the theory of social disorganization; theory of cultural transmission, theory of differential association, strain theory, theory of differential opportunity and anomie, social control or bond theory, etc., all of which inevitably provide a different perspective on the gang phenomenon. It is not difficult to deduce then that by using a variety of points of view to look at the same social object, the object will never appear the same. A multidisciplinary approach like *Theory Knitting* as proposed by Wood and Alleyne (2010), would essentially bring together all of the best ideas into a new framework to bring about unity in the variety of perspectives that already exist. Unfortunately, as the study of gangs still appears to be in a state of maturity, one would suggest that multidisciplinary frameworks are nowhere near sufficiently developed to cope with the ever changing nature of the gang phenomenon.

Also clouding our conceptualization or operationalization of the term *gang* are the methods by which researchers have been defining them (Bjerregaard, 2002). Ball and Curry (1995) for instance explore the many definitional methods that have been used over the years on explaining what a gang is. In their account they explore a series of definitional methods ranging from *methods of lexical definition* to what they term *synthetic definitions*¹⁰. Every method discussed by the authors held pros and cons for both sociological research and institutional application. Yet the amount of differing institutions using the term makes it even more difficult for the formation of a singular standardized definition (Wortley, 2010). Interestingly, and noted by Ball and Curry (1995) is that as quickly as one definition is established, a new one is being applied to the body of knowledge, and rightfully so. The concept of gangs is ever changing because it flexes according to the purposes for which it is being used. This is eloquently stated when the authors write “[e]ven when older definitions have proved acceptable, new definitions often become necessary, either because of changes

⁷ Lexical definitions are those found in dictionaries, and with respect to understanding gangs in sociology are not the most accurate as they “tend to be veiled expressions of bourgeois disapproval [and] may actually impede efforts to arrive at a standardized definition intrinsic to the phenomenon in question” (Ball & Curry, 1995, p. 227). The Synthetic definition method defines by “locating a phenomenon in a larger and presumably better-understood context” (Ball & Curry, 1995, p. 233). For an understanding of further definition methods, refer to Ball & Curry (1995).

in the phenomenon itself or changes in the purposes for which a definition is required.” (Bell & Curry, 1995, p. 239)

The changes in the phenomenon itself are inevitable. Gangs morph along with the changes in the environment that surround it which enables a continuous dialectical exchange between gangs and their environment (Sanchez-Jankowski, 1995). For example, The Latin King and Queen Nation of the United States was suggested to have begun as a criminal group but later evolved into a social movement in the 1990s (Ayling, 2011). The Black Panthers on the other hand began as a social movement, but from them were sowed the seeds that bred the Crips and the Bloods in the early 1980s (Ayling, 2011). Sanchez-Jankowski (1995) identifies this precisely when he says that gangs “respond to rather than create significant social change...Thus, to fully understand gangs in a particular era, one must consider broad changes that have affected them at specific times” (pp. 191 – 202). Ayling (2011) continues the idea of the importance of taking into account the social environment in which gangs participate in her study about gang change through *Evolutionary Theory*. She takes a new stance towards the study of gangs and applies the theory to try to explain how and why gangs have a tendency to evolve into greater or lesser violent groups (Ayling, 2011). As Ayling (2011) explains, the change in gangs is contingent with the changes in the socio-economic environment. Furthermore, she states that “[g]angs are complex systems that self-organize, nested within broader changing socio-economic systems at both national and global levels. Within this nested complexity, gangs have developed many variants” (Ayling, 2011, p.20). Therefore, the danger in attaching a definition of the term gang to my research seems futile as it appears to be in a constant state of evolution. Not only does the term assume a particular understanding among institutions, but also among each individual who has come to personalize the gang member identity. Furthermore, as it has been previously stated, the intentions of this research are not to reach any general conclusions, and even less to suggest another possible definition. Instead, it is to explore the unique experiences of gang membership through the trajectories of the participating individuals.

Where Ayling (2011) discussed variants of gangs in terms of the evolved level of violence in which they participate, Wortley (2010) also discusses variations of gangs. Contrastingly though, those that he identifies can be neatly classified based on a level grading system, dependent on the level of structure, organization and criminal/delinquent

activities in which they are involved (Wortley, 2010). According to the Public Safety Canada (2013) *Organized Crime Research Brief No. 12–Defining Street Gangs* supported predominantly by Wortley’s (2010) *Identifying Street Gangs: Definitional Dilemmas and Their Policy Implications*, the grading system that identifies the variations of gangs that may exist in a specific socio-economic environment seemed to be the most helpful when putting the concept of gangs into perspective. There are four levels on which gangs can be classified. As stated in the report:

Level one gangs are proposed as being characterized by fluid, transient friendship groups, usually based on a common neighbourhood and/or cultural identity, and largely spontaneous criminal activity. A level two gang is a group that has existed for a significant period of time (e.g., a year or more), and which engages in mostly planned and deliberate criminal activities, but has a largely informal leadership structure. Level three gangs have also existed for a year or more, but have a hierarchical organizational structure with easily identified leaders and followers, and aim at controlling one or more illicit activities within a certain geographic area. Finally, level four gangs consist of established criminal organizations having a long, stable history and a sophisticated organizational structure with easily identified leaders. They are entrenched in both the licit and illicit economies, and often use lower level gangs to perform some of the more risky criminal activities (Wortley, 2010).

After assessing the material available on the definitional issues of gangs, it became clear that definitions in the academic realm are highly subjective as they are derivative of the specific researcher’s theoretical slant as well as, dependent on the elements of time and space – the specific geography of the researcher’s study and when the study took place. In the political and criminal justice realm it would appear that the trend has been to focus more on the criminal or deviant nature of gangs (Sullivan, 2005; Le Blanc, 1999; Esbensen, Huizinga, & Weiher, 1993) in order to better coordinate the political agendas of the day (Bjerregaard, 2002) such as the tough on crime ideals. As Decker and Kempf-Leonard (1991) note “the response of policymakers to gangs defines them as a social problem” (Decker & Kempf-Leonard, 1991, p. 274), for this reason the importance of arriving at a single and uniform definition remains. The public’s perception of the gang problem is determined by the definitions being used and by the laws currently implemented by the policy makers in order to apparently curb the assumed gang problem. Then, as Bjerregaard (2002) writes,

... it is critical for social scientists to define gangs to offset any manipulation of the term by those outside the social science research community. At a minimum, a uniform definition would enable researchers to compare results...[which] would not only benefit researchers but also policy makers and eventually the general public (p.33).

It would be untrue to state that at the commencement of this research that I was totally unscathed by a preconceived notion attached to the term *gang*. I, like many others have had my perspective influenced by the multitude of notions and imagery that give the term *gang* its robust form. Through my subjection to these influences, that which has taken shape in my mind when considering the term gang is something parallel to that which was established and described by Wortley's (2010) first and second level of gangs. To my knowledge, gangs are typically a group comprised of youth, whereby the main purpose is to come together to attain a sense of belonging acquired through the process of socializing (Robert & Lascoumes, 1974; Winfree, Fuller, Vigil, Mays, 1992; Spergel, 1995; White, 2008). In this manner and for the gang's participants, the gang is a structured means of socializing unique to youth, who justifiably or not, maintain a presumed stigma of delinquency (Corriveau, 2009). Following Esterle-Hedibel (2007), it is thus important to note and distinguish the fluctuating and informal gangs whose time expectancy does not last beyond that of a couple of years, from the more structured criminally motivated groups typically depictive of those organized crime syndicates (i.e. Mafia, Hells Angels, Triads, Cartels, etc.).

The purpose for mentioning my personal perspective on the subject matter at hand is pragmatic. The intention is not to offer another singular and standardized definition, but to supply the reader with the personal mental image that was established and that also acted as the outline and parameter to better structure and contain the direction of my research. My perspective, undoubtedly influenced by both fact and fiction has led me to focus on those lower echelons, as described by Wortley's (2010) level one and two gangs to be represented throughout my research. In turn, remaining specific to a particular category has allowed the research to focus more directly and allot more time towards the greater interest, the trajectory of gang membership, instead of towards the debate of definitions.

By reading through the existing materials on gangs it has become apparent that establishing or borrowing a definition herein would only provide further ambiguity, and so I will refrain from that venture. I am of the opinion that any definition that could be established regarding gangs resides permanently in a subjective realm, accessible only to those who have experienced or continue to experience this phenomenon first hand. As a researcher I remain at the border of my participant's and my own reality, and can only hope to gain temporary access to cross that boarder. It is for this reason that I cannot take on the responsibility of establishing a definition of the term gang, and therefore leave it in the hands of the participants.

4.2 Gang Membership

Also needing clarification and important for this investigation, is the use of the concept of *gang membership*. Similar to the issues and concerns surrounding the definition of gangs, gang membership has also faced difficulty in reaching a point of clarity. Unfortunately, the concept of gang membership has been mostly characterized by the existing definitions of gangs which, as has been noted above, are mainly contingent upon the aspect of criminal activity. Wortley's (2010) study for instance produced a significant list of the definitions of gangs that have been used in both academia and in the Criminal Justice System. Each definition was different, but one common denominator was constant throughout, the required involvement by the group in criminal activities. Bjerregaard (2002) acknowledges as well that the evolving nature of the definition of gangs and the political motivations that produce them has attracted a negative connotation to the term and in effect, blurred potential studies for the individual cases of gang membership. She states that:

...one of the defining features that has separated benign organizations and groups from traditional street gangs has been involvement in criminal activity...Including criminal behaviour in the definition of a gang presents a tautology for researchers wishing to investigate and explain criminal behaviour by looking at the individual's gang membership (Bjerregaard, 2002, p. 32)

The characteristics of gang membership depend highly on the definitions of gangs currently in place, and by default are made to meet the same requirements. Perrault (2005)

notes that structuring our concepts of gangs, (and thus that of gang members) around the subject of criminality can lead to an inaccurate method of analysis. Distinguishing gang members apart from members of other types of groups of people, (i.e. work friends, sport teams or fraternities) on the basis of delinquency or criminality does not in fact create a clear enough distinction. Many researchers also go on to show that the majority of adolescents, regardless of ethnicity or origin or whether they belong to a gang or not, have in fact engaged in similar criminal activities, even of the violent nature (Sanchez-Jankowski, 1991; White & Mason, 2006; Corriveau, 2009). Gabor's (1994) study for example demonstrated that nearly 99% of Canadians will have committed a punishable offence throughout the course of their life. Similarly, Leblanc (1983) highlighted that 80% of the 3000 people from Montreal that were interviewed admitted to having at one point committed an offense punishable by the Canadian Criminal Code. Spergel (1995) and Sanchez-Jankowski (1991; 1994) both attest to the notion that criminal behaviours occur less frequently in the sub-culture of gangs and that it is in fact a restricted few who will actually adopt such a lifestyle. As Esbensen et al. (1993) made aware, "While gang members differ from non-offending youth on a number of social psychological variables, they do not differ from other youth involved in serious 'street' level offending" (p. 94).

Furthermore, it is also difficult to determine which criminal acts or acts of violence committed are in true fashion attributable to the spectrum of the gang (as gang related offences), versus motivated by personal undercurrents. Corriveau (2009) for instance wonders how we can in fact determine whether an altercation between two youth did occur specifically due to their belonging to a gang, and not because of a mutual misunderstanding between the two. As some researchers have noted, much of the information describing gang related offenses used by past criminological studies were derived from police accounts, official reports and statistics (Sullivan, 2005; Esbensen et. al., 1993; Katz & Jackson-Jacobs, 2004). Basing our understanding on the collection of this type of data can inspire a skewed perception when applied to the (mis) understanding of gang membership as a significant dependence on such data can result in the relationship between gang membership and criminality being misrepresented (Katz & Jackson-Jacobson, 2004). It is therefore important to clarify that the aim of this study is not to deny or reduce the significance of the gang/crime nexus, but rather acknowledges that a distinction between the two categories

must be sustained. As intertwined as they are, it is believed that the study of gang membership does not have to be structured around criminal or gang activity. Although the correlations between gang membership and criminality are apparent, it is my perspective that the studies of membership and criminality are not one in the same.

In order to mark the distinction, this study will investigate gang membership as a relatively brief experience for the youth who identify themselves as gang members, as well as work in opposition of the misconception that those who do become involved must remain involved for a significant period of time (Melde, Diem, Drake, 2012). Furthermore, this study will remain at a distance from determining gang membership based on such qualifiers as “gang involvement” based on typical stereotyped gang behaviour including but not limited to criminal activity (Katz & Jackson-Jacobson, 2004). Nor will this study abide by certain characteristics (see Appendix A) often used by police departments to determine an individual’s membership. The key aspect for determining membership herein will lay in the individual’s control and consist of his self-reporting and self-proclamation as such. Reason for this approach is that herein, gang membership will be looked at and understood as a self-concept (Demo, 1992).

Numerous researchers (Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Chard-Wierschem, 1993; Dukes, Martinez, Stein, 1997; Battin, Hill, Abbott, Catalano, & Hawkins, 1998; Harper and Robinson, 1999) have used the self-report method for the study of crime and delinquency to avoid sampling biases that can be generated by using crime statistics or data generated by the Criminal Justice System. According to Thornberry & Krohn (2000), the self-report method is “now a fundamental method for scientifically measuring criminality and forms the bedrock for etiological studies” (p.71). Studies on gang membership attest to the idea (similar to the broader concept of gangs), that gang membership does not exist in a vacuum, but instead on a continuum. In between the classifications of non-member and gang member exists a grey area with a variety of other classifications that also exist (Curry et al., 2002). Bjerregaard (2002) developed a classification system of membership based on self-reported data. She understood her samples to be students who were either; not in a gang; students who did not identify themselves as a gang member but hung around with a bunch of guys; self-identified gang members who stated that it was just a bunch of guys; and students who

identified themselves as members of an organized gang (Bjerregaard, 2002). Curry et al. (2002), borrowing from a number of other researchers also note that the loosely structured gangs (apart from demonstrating that gangs can be transient), are conducive for different levels of gang membership. There are for instance, the inner circle and the outer circle, the regular, peripheral and temporary members as well as the main groups and “wannabe’s” (Curry et al., 2002). The key difference between this study and those just mentioned is that the intention of those studies were to distinguish the different levels of membership and attribute them to a certain level of offending, once again amalgamating the study of membership with the study of crime/delinquency into one.

This study on the other hand, as mentioned above will not venture into the realm of gang activity, if such were the case, the need for a classification of the different levels of membership that exist would be justifiable. Yet, the intention of this paper is to look at gang membership as a deviant identity which assumes the fact that a degree of delinquency must exist, whether the infractions are represented through the participation in recreational drug use or through acts of violence, it is of no matter. By looking at gang membership as a self-concept or as an identity, it does not require any external validation. The term acquires a complete subjective existence for the individual and an internal meaning for those who have self-identified themselves as having been gang members (Gadd & Farrall, 2004). Therefore, the participants of this study may potentially not have been recognized by others or by the Justice System as being members, or in terms of their membership may have resided within the grey portion of the continuum being either peripheral or “wannabe” members, but being that the focus of this study is solely on the concept of membership, an auto-acknowledgment or self-identification as a member is sufficient enough for the research to investigate the development of said deviant identity.

4.3 Risk Factors and Onset

When I first began volunteering in the field of social services there was a specific term that was employed to denote the service users or the program participants. The fundamental aim of these specific services was to provide out—reach and assistance to what they called *At-Risk Youth*. At the time I was not completely certain of what exactly these

youth were at risk of, but it soon became clear to me that this was simply a politically correct term to describe the poor inner-city kids. The more I thought about it, the more I became unsettled by the term as it seemed to imply not that they were at risk, but instead that they were the risks to greater society. When discussing gangs and specifically the onset of gang membership it is difficult to omit the issues attached to the concept of Risk Factors, especially when much of the discourse available trends towards pointing fingers at these destabilizing social imbalances.

Research dedicated to the investigation of how youth become involved with gangs are more often than not “Risk Factor” oriented, determining the catalysts for what is the initiation into gang membership (Craig et al. 2002; Dukes et. al., 1997; Yoder, Whitbeck, & Hoyt, 2003; Thornberry et. al., 2003). Researchers conclude that a variety of risk factors such as the effects of poverty, economic hardships and social exclusion (Bania, 2009), broken families, immigration and the difficulties of acculturation (Miller, Leve & Kerig, 2011), unemployment, etc. are precursors for delinquent behaviour and gang involvement. Although such factors may be indicative of some of the reasons for youth to join gangs, as Greene and Pranis (2007) correctly state “no single factor or set of factors can successfully predict which youth will become gang members” (Greene & Pranis, 2007, p.45). Thornberry’s (1998) research on the Seattle Social Development Project found that “a majority (61 percent) of the boys and 40 percent of the girls who scored above the median in seven Risk Factor domains were gang members”¹¹ (cited in Wyrick & Howell, 2004 found in Greene & Pranis, 2007, p. 46). One must question though, would those same participants have attributed their gang membership to the same risk factor domains?

When considering Risk Factors Pearce (2012) writes, “[y]es, social inequity and social trouble can equal gangs – sometimes. But not in all cases...many [gang members] come from middle-class, even privileged backgrounds, of traditional families”¹². This particular study will take into account that the effects of Risk Factors may aid in the

¹¹ Greene and Pranis indicated that the risk factor domains included “peer, school and personal domains as well as community factors (such as availability of drugs and neighborhood integration) and family factors (such as, supervision, parental attachment to the child, proviolent [sic] attitudes, and family instability)” (Green & Pranis, 2007, p.46).

¹² See

http://www.thestar.com/opinion/editorial_cartoon/2012/07/19/scarborough_shootings_renew_tired_old_debates_about_gangs.html

induction of an individual to become a gang member, but nonetheless remains confident that such is the exception and not the rule. It is imperative to consider here that any one risk factor or combination thereof does not hold a direct correlation towards gang membership in and of itself. Simply being poor and Hispanic will not determine gang membership any more than coming from a white nuclear family will determine one's sexual preference.

Furthermore, Risk Factors reside in somewhat of a paradoxical state. Not only are there people who are confronted with the same struggles derived from risk factors who do not take on the gang member identity, but there are also those who manage to exit gangs while still battling the same detrimental circumstances. This is to say that there are people who have left the gang but who still come from single parent families, who still remain economically unstable and who have never changed neighbourhoods. Are risk factors then as relevant for the departure from the gang as people's entrance into them?

This study acknowledges that Risk factors are only one facet of the multiplicity of reasoning behind why any one individual might join a gang, and remains confident in the notion that only those who have experienced gang membership first hand can accurately attribute the causes for the onset of such an identity. That being noted, this study will attest to the potential of a common element amongst the individuals who embody the gang member identity, but that the latent commonality resides more so in the acute feeling of social exclusion than as a derivative from any one or combination of Risk Factors.

If we consider Thrasher's (1927) study of gangs in Chicago, it found that the sensations of marginalization and economic instability attached to immigration become so deeply entrenched that they stifle and detriment the process of acculturation (Miller, 2011). Under this setting, the enclave or neighbourhood as an environment can simultaneously produce a degree of solidarity amongst some individuals who manage the social challenges they face through deviant or extra-legal measures, all the while not necessarily overcoming the challenges, but rebelling against them and the system which has put them in place. That being said, this paper does not negate the existence of Risk Factors nor their potential for setting the stage of the inherent feelings of marginalization amongst many, but in no way will they play the role of the scapegoat and be understood as the causes and reasoning for the onset of one's gang membership. In that respect, this paper will emphasize instead how the

learned methods of interaction within the individual's particular environments is the keyway that unlocks the flow within a stream of events that lead towards vital transition points¹³ that have the capacity to direct the individual's trajectory towards the onset of a gang member identity.

4.4 Commitment

Once an individual has accepted the identity of gang member he/she begins to participate in a series of rituals and ceremonies that have the effect of not only solidifying the identity within the individual, but also towards a specific intended audience. As Goffman (1956) explains, the individual is always in a dramaturgical state, one's environment and its elements become the propped stage for the role each individual must perform as defined by the circumstances of the particular act and scene. The physical presence of an audience is not necessary to provoke a specific behaviour from an individual actor, but the audience's omnipresence is prevalent by means of the specific norms and values which have been established within a particular sub-culture. Goffman (1956) admits that any one individual has the capacity to act the role of a variety of masks, but our commitment to one becomes established through a tendency to revert to one mask specifically to complete interactions in like scenarios.

Becker (1960) adds to this concept by explaining that people's consistency in behaviour can be explained on a system of awards and penalties. He uses the terminology '*side bet*' in reference to the social constraints that inhibit the potential for people's actions to deviate from its consistent flow. Similar to Goffman's notion of an omnipresent audience, Becker (1960) attests that "a person sometimes finds that he has made side bets constraining his present activity because the existence of generalized cultural expectations provides penalties for those who violate them" (Becker, 1960, p. 36). By following this line, it could thus be argued that our potential actions follow a stream of consistency so long as the particular actions are redeeming a certain level of social capital. At the moment that our actions incur a loss of social capital or threaten our established identity, (either through

¹³Sampson and Laub (1990) describe *transitions* as "specific life events that are embedded in trajectories and evolve over shorter time spans" Sampson & Laub, 610:1990).

encountering an embarrassing situation or by being excluded from a group or earning a bad reputation) our course of action will be revised as to avoid like circumstances in the future. The commitment to an identity strengthens as the social capital accumulates through the positive reinforcement that we attain from our audience, the more reinforcement we receive, the more committed we become to a particular role. Likewise, the commitment to an identity can also diminish if the funds in the identity bank deplete.

Symbolism also plays a significant part in establishing one's level of commitment to a role. Goffman (1963) describes this process vigorously in his book entitled *Stigma; Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* where he makes note that negative reinforcement may also factor in establishing one's commitment to an identity. The main idea revealed in this work is that people tend to adhere to the social stigmas that accompany the roles and identities that we chose or that are sometimes thrust upon us. For instance, if you are smart and good at school you are labeled a nerd, if you do not do well in school but perform well at sports you are a jock, if you have been convicted of an offence you are deemed a criminal. Like the self-fulfilling prophecy, the frequency with which one is referred to by any categorical label aids in the individual's eventual acceptance of the label upon them while also committing to the behaviours and actions associated to that label. As a reiterating example, a nick-name for instance has various purposes; it can act simply as an identifier and depending on who that particular identifier represents, it can potentially also carry a particular reputation. Essentially, once a name has been established, the person to whom it belongs must maintain its relevance by personifying it if the individual has indeed come to embody its significance on an intrinsic level. The more one is referred to by a particular name by others the easier it becomes accepted by the individual to whom it is describing. In a cyclical fashion, the more entangled the name becomes with the role that the individual is performing, the more pressure the individual feels to comply with the actions that the name represents. For example, if someone was known to have easy accessibility to illegally obtain firearms, they may acquire the nickname "Burner" (an urban term meaning firearm). The particular name symbolizes an action as well as an identity and reputation. The individual's commitment to such an identity would thus necessitate that the individual continue to perform the action of obtaining firearms in order to solidify and maintain the prevalence of that identity.

Symbols such as money and material objects as Goffman (1956) asserted, also aid towards not only the commitment to, but also the aspirations of a particular identity. Money and material objects become the symbols of success; the more objects we possess or the more money we have to spend in this society tends to be equated to having achieved a high level of success. Yet, what is important for this study when considering the concept of commitment is not necessarily the symbols of success in and of themselves, but more so, the rituals or the manners in which these symbols are obtained. In certain circles obtaining wealth through hard work and dedication is of great value, whereby since the ritual of hard work redeems both social and economic capital, the greater the likelihood that the individual will commit to these methods. The same stands true in those circles where one's success and notoriety is often times determined by the ease and lack of effort it takes to earn *fast money*,¹⁴ whereby a commitment to these specific rituals would enhance and maintain the desired identity.

4.5 Desistance

The research on the desistance from gangs and delinquency is a critical aspect to this investigation. Special attention will be given to how the individual actor manages to (if at all possible) abandon the identity of gang member. Although great breakthroughs have been made academically in generating theories in respect to the desistance of crime and delinquency, it is nonetheless limited. The majority of the literature surrounding this topic is heavily delinquent behaviour and delinquent activity saturated. It discusses more often than not the process and factors involved in the potential arrival of the cessation of criminal careers. Albeit the lack of information of desistance regarding deviant identities, the ideas that have been generated through these studies are useful in making similar links and conclusions.

¹⁴ An Urban term referring to money earned mostly through illicit or illegal activities such as selling drugs, robbery, prostitution etc.

A popular theme amongst the scholars when discussing the desistance from crime is what is commonly referred to as the criminal career¹⁵ approach. Used to track one's criminal process –the sequence in delinquent events – this approach provides great insight into an individual's trajectory associated to crime. However, a fundamental flaw has been evidenced by Farrington (2007) as well as Laub & Sampson (2001); the drawback surfaces when one contemplates what is to be considered a career in crime. How severe must the crimes be? Or how many crimes must be committed over what length of time to be considered a career? Farrington (2007) asks for instance, “what should be the minimum prior frequency of offending be before desistance can be studied?” (p. 129). He stipulates that according to the current measurement methods in place used to calculate criminal careers, it is quite probable that “an offender may commit only one offense during the criminal career” (Farrington, 2007, p. 129). Considering the transient level of gang membership that this study is investigating, and keeping in mind the prospective abovementioned motivations as to why some youth are attracted to joining the “lower level” gangs, the idea that a one-time offender can be denoted a career criminal raises some cause for concern. As mentioned in the introduction and to be further developed later in this paper, our behaviours are influenced by a matrix of different identities that reside within all of us, each called to action depending on the circumstances of the present interaction. Therefore, the idea presented by the criminal career paradigm that an individual (with an array of complex identities) can be stigmatized or labeled a career criminal without a clear understanding of what constitutes a criminal career, appears to be an inaccurate description and can thus stand to be debated.

Nevertheless, we must not negate that this approach in the study of criminology has brought about a multitude of significant factors that can be considered, especially with regards to the element of desistance. For instance, the pinpointing of trends in the significant moments and occurrences of an individual's life that provides them with the motivation to move towards a reduction in their criminal habits. Structured on the basis of the procedural evolution of delinquency - tracking the stages of onset, commitment and desistance - it is noted that this specific paradigm can be easily mistaken or confused with being the conceptual focus of this paper. Yet, at the risk of sounding redundant it should nonetheless

¹⁵Farrington (1992) researched the paradigm of criminal careers in the U.K. where he specifies that the criminal career is “the longitudinal sequence of offenses committed by an individual offender” (p. 521).

be stressed that since the focus of the criminal career paradigm is to explore the prevalence and frequency of criminal acts by the individual or by a group (Farrington, 1992), omitting the specificity of the inquiry into delinquent acts in my investigation will highlight how this particular study differs.

Research into the aspect of desistance such as that done by Sampson and Laub (2001) indicates that the study of desistance has been hurdled by the fact that “[t]here have been few long-term longitudinal studies of crime over the full life span [and] as a consequence, relatively little is known about desistance” (p. 1). A key aspect in the study of desistance is the life-course approach which is a longitudinal study that follows trends and changes in the development of anti-social behaviour, but is nonetheless said to be somewhat underdeveloped (Mulvey, Steinberg, Fagan, Cauffman, Piquero, Chassin, Knight, Brame, Schubert, Hecker, & Lasoya, 2004). In comparison to the life-course approach of studies characterized by Glueck and Glueck’s (1950; 1968) classic study of criminal careers, this investigation into the nature of the trajectory of a deviant identity is but a morsel of what is a much bigger story. It is important to acknowledge that in order to better understand the parts; we must first have a clear view of the whole. Malcolm X (1964) in his autobiographical account, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* describes this idea perfectly when he wrote, “...But people are always speculating-why I am as I am? To understand that of any person, his whole life, from birth, must be reviewed. All of our experiences fuse into our personality. Everything that ever happened to us is an ingredient” (p. 153).

Not having incorporated a life-course approach to this investigation, a means to understand how the deviant identity formulated throughout the course of one’s life, can be a potential flaw to this investigation. The lack of a more refined personal history backdrop may infringe on the ability to reach profound analytical depth or perhaps stunt in the ability to more accurately interpret the subconscious meanings found within the participant’s life-story scripts. By adopting some of the features of the life-course approach, this study will break the subject of study into a temporal process which identifies three important time frames, those being; the onset, the continuation and desistance (Laub & Sampson, 2001). Although this study is limited to the amount of background information needed to draw more informed conclusions, it is believed that by breaking the trajectory and timeline into a similar three staged rubric, astute conclusions can still be inferred.

Needless to say, not every study on desistance is approached in the same manner and broken down into the same elements. One particular article by Maruna and Roy (2007) discuss the idea of “knifing off”. They consider the level of importance for deviant individuals to have to completely segregate themselves from people, places and things which may have previously provoked criminal behaviour. In terms of the process of desisting from crime they ask, who gets knifed off and who does the knifing, and whether in fact this process is necessary or sufficient enough to incite behavioural change (Maruna & Roy, 2007). This investigation will consider this idea of knifing off and verify whether desistance from an identity requires the elimination of certain elements in order to stray from such an identity to potentially adopt a positive one. For instance, must one isolate or be isolated from certain peers or seek substance abuse counseling to aid in the desistance from a deviant identity? Or would this have any effect at all considering that the desistance from a specific deviant identity does not suggest the cessation of all deviant identities or delinquent behaviours. For it may be quite possible to drop the self-concept of gang member and adopt or continue to one of a drug dealer.

Certain researchers have made claims of theories which accentuate the weight of the attachment to pro-social sources towards a process of desisting (Sampson & Laub, 1993); these studies focus more so on the impact of family links, employment prospects and moving away from criminal peers. Others, such as Farrall, Bottoms, and Shapland (2010) indicate the need to focus attention towards the more macro issues which may facilitate the move either towards or away from criminal behaviour. The latter concept is forwarded by an element of agency, whereby the actor has the capability to make decisions and is presented with certain opportunities within the social world in order to lead a more conformist lifestyle (Laub, Najin, & Sampson, 1998; Laub & Sampson, 2001; Mulvey et al., 2004). What Farrall, Bottoms, and Shapland (2010) add is that, what is not being considered enough are the social structures in place which foster agency, which they note, “agency is always exercised within the context of social structures” (p. 547). In their opinion, a better look into how the structures of society create the environment to either impede or nurture the process towards desistance could offer new directions of understanding. Acknowledging the importance of the macro forces and the elements of structure in place guiding the social body could only be helpful in better explaining the movements of the individual on a micro scale.

This paper, although engulfed in the lived experience of the individual and maintaining an assumed importance on the micro elements of agency also recognizes the impact of macro elements with respect to the individual's self-concept. A deviant self-concept may very well be unique to the individual, but is also in continuous interaction within the social structures already in place. A thorough investigation on the concept of identity can thus not be envisioned through such a dichotomous micro versus macro lens, but must instead consider the influencing natures of both.

A further unique approach to the investigation of desistance was presented by Pyrooz and Decker (2011) who investigated the process of leaving the gang specifically. Their research, based on 84 participants who claimed to have left their gang indicated that there are two motives for leaving a gang, characterized by internal (push) and external (pull) factors (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). The external factors were those that existed outside of the gang, indicative of the abovementioned turning points such as finding a new job, or becoming romantically involved with someone (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). The push motives were thought to be those which existed within the psyche of the individual. These motives were most indicative of cognitive shifts and attitudes towards the gang itself. Aside from investigating these motives, they also aimed to see if the self-nominated ex-members had managed to cut ties with their fellow gang peers. This can be related back to Maruna and Roy (2007) and the idea of knifing off, whether or not people can desist from a particular behaviour whilst maintaining the same social network and environment. In their findings they conclude that, in order to achieve a successful exit from a gang "actions speak louder than words" (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011, p. 423). Maruna and Roy (2007) would suggest that by simply attesting to have left the gang may not represent the individual's true behaviour. According to the authors, one must have gone through both cognitive and routine activity changes in order to accurately be characterized as an ex-member (Maruna & Roy, 2007).

In the same study, the authors made mention of an idea that I found to be rather interesting and important to discuss for the purpose of this paper. According to Pyrooz and Decker (2011), the operationalization of the term desistance can create certain causes for confusion, similar to the terms *gang* and *gang membership* as previously discussed. They assume the study of desistance in an individual becomes difficult "as it has been problematic

to determine at what stage an individual truly has desisted from their involvement in crime” (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011, p. 417). This brings me to note then that throughout these pages so far, the term desistance has been described as part of a process, the end of a process to be more exact, but such is not necessarily the case. Desistance itself can be seen as a process in itself, a continuous course of action, whereby one is always working towards reducing the effects of that which is being desisted from. It is necessary to highlight that the term desistance is not to imply termination or cessation (Laub & Sampson, 2001). The latter represents a definitive end whereas desistance can be thought of more as a work in progress. Life-course research such as those discussed have identified that desistance is not a final stage as it is quite possible for people to revert back to criminal tendencies, similar to how addicts can relapse. Laub and Sampson (2001) describe the difference between these concepts as, desistance being a process, rather than termination or cessation which is an event (p.3).

Within this research desistance will be used as a term indicative of a process, leading towards a potential discontinuance or cessation or end. The main reason being for this position reverts back to the fact that this study is not based on life-course data. The participants were interviewed at a specific point within the life-course about their self-proclamation as ex-gang members, but this study does not have the ability to track whether or not these individuals were able to maintain that self-concept by a complete elimination of the gang member identity from the internal identity pantry. Any indication that such an identity still remains tucked away in the back of the shelves of their subjective, likely means that the identity remains in the process of desistance.

Chapter 5 – *Hoodied and Masked up*: Methodology

5.1 Recruitment

The inspired recruitment method for this research was informed specifically by two sources, namely that of Wright and Decker's (1994) investigation titled *Burglars on the Job* as well as that of Jacobs' (2000) *Robbing Drug Dealers*. These investigations set out to infiltrate dangerous underground sub-cultures. This is to say that they probed deep into populations not readily accessible to many researchers, working with participants who were not particularly enthusiastic about divulging information regarding their incriminating experiences. Essentially, the participants included in these investigations are as Jacobs described, "hidden populations – groups difficult to reach by virtue of stigmatizing and/or illegal behaviours its members participate in and actively conceal from outside view" (Jacobs, 2000, p.9). The characteristics incorporated in the research samples involved in these specific studies made apparent that the people being sought for my own investigation held similar qualities, primarily that such participants would not be the easiest to come across. It seemed that my best chances to attempt any sort of investigation on a population that maintains a code of silence or *omerta* to outsiders, or abide by a general rule of not "snitching", would be to mirror the techniques as prescribed by the abovementioned researchers.

To begin the recruitment I decided that a snowball sampling method would best tend to the needs of my research. This method is one that works on a chain of continuous referrals whereby once a participant is acquired, they would refer another person to participate and so forth. The most difficult aspect about this sampling technique with regards to the intended sample is making that initial contact (Decker & Wright, 1996) precisely because they are hard to locate, and once located they may be reluctant to participate (Jacobs, 2000). The reluctance is in part due to the type of suspicion that researchers arise within these subjects. To this notion Jacobs describes accurately that, "one of the most common suspicions criminals have about field researchers is that they are covert operatives of some sort" (Jacobs, 2000, p. 10). In order to redirect the adversity that a researcher not immersed within the sub-culture being studied faces, it is imperative that one find a 'gatekeeper', someone

who can open the doors to the ‘hidden population’ and act as a reliable and safe reference for the researcher.

Due to the area of where I resided and attended school for a portion of my life, and aided by the fact that I had done extensive volunteer work in both community and youth centers in the GTA, I had (previous to the endeavor of this research) come into contact with some individuals who matched the characteristics indicative of my intended research participants. These were individuals who I was acquainted with simply because we resided in the same neighbourhood or went to the same school or because we shared mutual friends and acquaintances. They were also members of the community centers that I not only frequented but also became involved with. I was therefore granted a level of entrance and acceptance within the intended groups I wished to study and was fortunate to not have to face the same hurdles faced by many researchers who find themselves completely outside of the realm they wish to investigate¹⁶. The initial contact was furthermore aided by the use of a social media network, being that I was able to make contact with people whom I did not have an address or phone number for. Through the social media network I was able to reach out to more potential participants in a shorter amount of time and simply await a response of those who were willing to participate.

During the process of recruiting potential participants I prepared a recruitment script which I used unanimously throughout the process whether recruiting via social media, written text, in person or over the phone. The script had two essential purposes: to attract intrigue and interest, and most importantly, to outline participant eligibility. In order to cast a wider net and reach the greatest number of potential participants, I amplified the recruitment by approaching people who did not qualify as participants, but who may have had access to people who did qualify and could therefore provide a potential referral. Due to this wide casting call, it was ever more imperative within my recruitment script to specify my research goals. I needed to establish that my focus was directed at exploring Latino youth of the Greater Toronto Area who perceived themselves at one point or another to have had been part of a gang. Understanding the trajectory or timeline of gang membership from their

¹⁶ See *Gang Leader For A Day* (2008) by Sudhir Venkatesh for an ethnographical account of the difficulties faced by researchers who seek to investigate criminal sub-cultures.

perspective was also one of my immediate goals, therefore their self-proclaimed status as ex-members, or having reached the end of membership, was a crucial element for this research.

I strongly believe that had I approached people completely unknown to me that my recruitment process may have taken much longer than it did. There may have been a greater risk of arising suspicion amongst strangers, or a higher level of disinterest in my personal endeavors with people who could not relate to me. Yet, since the primary people who were contacted by me were known, a rapport was already built with these individuals prior to entering my master's program, which I believe solidified my reputation as a person not needing to be suspicious of, something I hoped would extend through the line to future referred individuals as well.

Similar to Decker and Wright's (1994) and Jacobs' (2000) studies, I also offered monetary compensation¹⁷ for the individuals who were interested in participating. My methods differed from those more experienced researchers slightly though, as further compensation was awarded in their studies to the individuals who successfully provided referrals of further candidates. I on the other hand did not. My study was intent on the provision of strict and complete anonymity amongst the participants; whereby awarding any such further compensation for a successful referral would reveal to the referee that their referral did indeed participate, essentially eliminating the promise of anonymity amongst the participating individuals.

Needless to say, although my recruitment seemed to be flawless, before I could begin my data collection, two of my potential participants wound up charged, sentenced and incarcerated, and thus becoming inaccessible and thwarting what was to start my snowball sampling method. I had to quickly change my plan of action and fall back on a contingency plan which proved to not be as successful as the models which were previously being mirrored. Having lost these two key participants, I also lost all potential of obtaining any of their future contacts. In order to not succumb to this misfortune I began door knocking. This is to say that I approached certain community centers in the area who deal with facilitating troubled youth, drop in centers, youth group centers and any services who were directly

¹⁷ I would like to extend a very big thank you to Patrice Corriveau and to the Metropolis Group for providing to me the necessary funding for this research.

involved with the youth of the communities I was studying. I approached the program directors with my recruitment script and explained to them my research intentions, asking them finally if I could recruit any individual interested in participating in my scholarly research. In a sense, I had to step out of my researcher identity and assume the identity of a hustler, not of drugs or of sex, but of information (Venkatesh, 2008). This process was difficult and time consuming to say the least, and quite honestly, did not prove to be as fruitful as I had hoped. I had initially intended to recruit eight participants but my point of saturation fell short by half, as I managed to recruit only four participants for the current study. Instead of making one initial contact from whom to draw further referrals, or finding a gatekeeper to open the dam of flowing information, I had to make four separate initial contacts, none of which managed to provide any further participants. On a positive note, to counter what I had come to think of as a low sampling number, according to the Public Safety Canada website, four people exceeds the minimum number of people required for a group to be considered a gang (which is 3), and I therefore managed to recruit a gang's worth of participants! Furthermore, aside from a smaller sample being more suitable and conducive towards a more in-depth investigation into the accounts of the acquired participants, it is thought that a larger number of participants would not have been of any greater importance in such a study which only looked to explore the trajectories of gang membership and not to materialize the notion of *gang* nor to make generalized conclusions or truth statements in its regard. Although having eight participants would have enriched this research by providing more trajectories to compare and contrast, it is nonetheless believed that the actual number of participants acquired was sufficient to fulfill the intended aims of this paper.

Another hurdle I had faced in the preliminary stages of my research was completing with the ethics requirements. Since my study is one that involves live and human participants, there is a specific level of ethics that I had to comply with as to assure that I would not be venturing into the unethical treatment of my participants. The application that had to be submitted to the Ethics Department was rigorous and lengthy, but there appeared to be a couple of key aspects that needed further development in order to assure I maintained the ethical standards of my research.

The main ethical factors that I had to surmount were those of maintaining the safety and the anonymity of my participants. At one point before being given ethical clearance I had to present myself alongside my thesis supervisor to the Ethics Committee. The meeting was not especially long, but was quite curious to say the least. My supervisor and I only had a faint idea of what it was that the committee wanted to discuss. When the discussion began it became clear that the committee wanted to simply remind us that gangs are dangerous. Perhaps since a large volume of the material that focuses on gangs is in some fashion either counting or trying to understand the assumed nature of violence that takes place amongst gangs, or the degree to which they operate beyond the law, it is difficult to disassociate the prospect of imminent danger when even just hearing the word *gang*. The committee wanted to assure that in no way was I going to be recording conversations that dealt with the discussion of offending. Luckily for us, this was never the intention of my research.

We thus needed to make some clarification. Firstly, we clarified that the proposed intent of this research was to explore the concept of identities, but specifically the trajectory of the “deviant identity” of gang membership by those who refer to themselves as such. Contrary to many other studies that have focused on gangs, this study was not interested in interpreting individuals levels of criminality, but just their understanding of the identity as it pertained to and was perceived by them. Secondly, it had to be clarified that although criminal activity was not the focus of this research, being that it is a research subject based within the doctrine of criminology, the topic of crime could not be avoided completely. Not preemptively assuming a certain degree of criminality amongst the participants already would dry the study’s criminological roots. Nonetheless, the study was approved, but it was critical for the approval that I took every precaution to uphold the personal safety of my participants and of myself from the threat of gangs.

The manner in which I ensured the anonymity was by assigning the participants numbers in order of my contact with them. Also, there was to be no personal information to be included in my research paper or any other information that could act as an identifier such as age, name, or area of residence within the GTA. Furthermore, as a precaution I restricted the participants from being informed of the identity of their fellow participants, which as was

previously mentioned, was also throttled by not awarding further compensation upon the recruitment of other potential participants who may have been referred.

The participant's safety had to also be kept intact on two levels, mentally and physically. Because our discussions could spark repressed feelings and/or memories, it was important to implement a system to ensure that the participants did not incur damaging mental duress. At any time the participant did not feel comfortable answering any question, or going into detail about a specific topic, they would only have to inform me and I would not continue that line of questioning. Furthermore, if at any time the participant did not feel like continuing the interview they could cease the interview without loss of compensation. This is to say that no matter how much information they gave me or how long or short the interview lasted, they would nonetheless be ensured the monetary payment for their efforts. Physically, their safety was ensured through their anonymity since no other party would be informed of their participation in my research, there was therefore no threat from outside parties such as rival members from gangs who may have felt threatened by the individual's participation.

A guarantee was also made to the participants in that any and all information that was offered would be completely private between the participant, my research supervisor and me. It was assured that the recorded and transcribed verbatim would be stored under lock and key in a safe place known only to myself and my research supervisor and would in no way be used in any form of coercion or as incriminating evidence, the potential for which was also a matter of concern for the Ethics Committee. Although all information indicating illegal activity could not be avoided (and is a staple in most criminological research), as has been mentioned above, the aspect of an existing level of gang activity and criminal behaviour for this research was already assumed and therefore not sought out in the interviews. When such elements of conversation did arise, the interview model employed allowed flexibility for the researcher to redirect the conversation away from such subject matter. To this effect, the interview would not be saturated with any type of incriminating information that could be used against the participants or any parties discussed throughout the interviewing process.

This was accomplished through the use of an interview guide during the interviewing to assist me in better directing the conversation in the path of the intended subject matter and similarly, away from ineffectual topics. In order to do this the interview guide provided staple questions that were used throughout the entire interview session. For example, there was a specific ice-breaker question that I resorted to after explaining the specific goals of the research. By bluntly asking what their perspective of a gang was or by asking them to describe or define a gang based on their experience was a good means to get the ball rolling on the specific subject matter. This question was then followed by asking if their perspective or definition was the same today as it was while they were members. This was fundamental in identifying a clear change in perspective from then and now which allowed me to begin to direct the conversation towards the onset of their membership.

Another question that was asked throughout was one about the participant's idols. Again, the participants were asked to identify who their idols were before and while they were members and who they accepted as an idol during the interview in their state of non-membership. From my perspective, this question gave indices towards the individual participant's influences at two distinct points in time during the trajectory of their gang membership. It once again highlighted a notion of change, partly in their understanding of self, but more importantly, about who or what characters were influencing their identities during their time as ex-members.

Lastly, there were a series of transition phrases that were also used in two occurrences. Although the flow of the conversation would independently jump from different time periods of their stories of trajectory, cues such as: "Tell me how you got involved" or "returning back to while you were a member", were often used to bring some order to what is the chaos of speech. Furthermore, these same types of transition statements were also used to lead the conversation away from subject matter that was not desirable or did not pertain to the study. For instance, if a participant began divulging too deeply into accounts that described gang activity, either in too much detail or without being relatable to the topic of their trajectory, the conversation would be diverted back to the focus of the research.

A further concern that had to be addressed during my ethics proposal was my own personal safety. This was established by always and only meeting with the participants in a public location. Primary and secondary phone conversations were also held with the individuals before an interview date was set up in order to properly explain my research intentions but more importantly, to also establish a level of rapport with the participants and gain a certain level of comfort. As eager as I was to conduct the interviews and obtain the rich data in their possession, I had to still keep my wits about me as to not seem over eager and potentially give off the impression of being an easy target for robbery since they knew that I would be carrying a minimum amount of money necessary to pay them with after the interview was completed.

There was a specific incidence in my recruitment stage where I had to cancel an interview as I became suspicious that the participant's intent was no longer genuine and that my safety could have been threatened. I had been contacted by the director of a youth program informing me of a specific youth who did show interest in participating in my research. The initial contact with this individual and me was made by the program director via telephone. At that time the potential participant did seem enthused about participating and appeared to be very helpful (perhaps because he was within the setting of the program's facilities), at which point we went on to set up an interview date. When I had contacted the individual to confirm on the scheduled day of the interview he told me that he could not make it to the specific location that we had decided upon and asked if we could change the location to where he was at that moment. Since the alternate location was also in a public space I had agreed to meet him and told him that I would call him once I got closer to that general area. I contacted the individual once I was nearby to gather information about where we would meet specifically and noticed a change of tone in his demeanor, he no longer sounded as he did when I contacted him at the youth program facilities. During our conversation he inquired on two accounts regarding the amount of compensation that he was due for the interview, which for me was a cause for concern as we had previously established that amount on our initial telephone conversation.

Feeling this unease, I decided to contact the program director who referred this individual to me to ensure that he would vouch for the potential participant. I asked the

director how well he knew him and how long he was a part of the program, his responses to the questions did not erupt any further confidence about the potential participant as the director did not seem to know him very well and said he had only seen him in the building no more than a handful of times. I debated whether to continue to interview this individual or not and decided to attempt to contact him one last time. Upon this contact he asked if it was possible to change the meeting place for a second time to a subway station that was not near to the area that he had previously told me he was. This was the final indication which led me to decide that I would not pursue an interview with this individual as I could not trust him. I informed him that I could not make it to that location and that if he did still want to participate in the interview that it would be best that we met at the youth program centre on a different date. I did not hear back from that individual.

5.2 Data Collection Face-to-Face Semi-Structured Interviews

The purpose of qualitative, interview-based research is to describe and clarify people's experiential life “as it is lived, felt, undergone, made sense of and accomplished by human beings” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 84).

Because much of an individual's life experience is immeasurable to others and because experience has vertical depth (Polkinghorne, 2005), interviewing distinguishes itself from other research approaches by engaging participants directly in a conversation with the researcher in order to generate deeply contextual, nuanced and authentic accounts of participants' outer and inner worlds, that is, their experiences and how they interpret them (Schultze & Avital, 2010, p. 1).

The interview acts as an agent whereby the researcher can examine how active members of interest to the researcher interpret their circumstances in their lived experiences. The researcher can thereby extract hands-on knowledge via the participant pertaining to a particular aspect of interest and interpret it through dialogue, examining how and why certain elements were given meaning to the actor. Qualitative interviews are able to elicit perceptions and subjective meanings in the pursuit of obtaining insight and understanding.

Following in the footsteps of Wright and Decker's (1994) and Jacobs' (2000) study, adopting similar strategies would achieve what is known in the social sciences as *thick data*. Although the face-to-face semi structured interview model was used in this study to render substantive information, it does not come without its flaws.

Some of the elements that a researcher must be weary of when conducting the "Romantic Approach" as declared by Schultze and Avital (2010), are the problems of maintaining boundaries, the difficulties of rapport building, the issue of alluding to too much self-disclosure and of listening to untold stories and feelings of guilt and vulnerability (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). Firstly, a researcher must be aware that the participant-observer boundaries that exist may become blurred after gaining the trust of the participants in order for them to feel comfortable enough to expose their most inner and intimate thoughts. The observer while trying to level the playing field to ensure good rapport may find themselves becoming too friendly with the subjects which may create biases in interpretations, albeit the process being a means by which to co-construct meaning through the interpretation of the lived experiences of the participant. Another line that may be blurred is that the observer may inadvertently take on the role of a therapist, typically induced by the participant feeling at ease and liberated by having someone to talk to which they may not otherwise have.

Furthermore, "the interviewer should also be aware that the openness and intimacy of the interview may be seductive and lead subjects to disclose information that they may later regret" (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007, p. 33). Morse and Field also capture the idea that:

Data collection can be an intense experience, especially if the topic that one has chosen has to do with the illness experience or other stressful human experiences. The stories that the qualitative researcher obtains in interviews will be stories of intense suffering, social injustice, or other things that will shock the researcher (Morse & Field, 1995, p. 78 in Dickson-Swift et al.).

This means that although the purpose of qualitative interviewing is to portray and illuminate the experiential life of the participants as it is experienced and understood, there are potential drawbacks that a qualitative researcher must keep in mind no matter what level of experience of the investigator.

A positive and important factor to this method of research is the open-ended line of questioning that was incorporated into the semi-structured interviewing style. The open-

ended style enhances the continuity of the questioning as it allows for the interviewing to be more responsive and accommodating to the natural flow of conversation. This method considers the entire context of that which is being told in order to magnify the specifics of the whole experience while not constraining and reducing the participant's responses to simple 'yes' or 'no' answers (Hill et al., 1997). The factor of a physical presence of a researcher while researching controversial issues may motivate respondents to provide the most socially acceptable response not indicative of their true experiences or behaviour. The humanistic approach as indicated by Alasuutari (1995) develops sufficient rapport with the participant by gaining his/her confidence to ultimately provide the researcher with the most thick descriptions possible. As evidenced by Polkinghorne, (1994) "a series of intensive face-to-face interviews produces the most authentic and deep descriptions because skillful interviewers are typically able to establish a climate of trust and openness with the interviewees" (Polkinghorne, 1994 in Hill et al., 1997, p. 537). This openness creates less of a need to manage impressions and thus facilitates the exploration of private experiences which leads to the availability of thick descriptions. These thick descriptions can present human behaviour in a way that takes not only the physical and social context into account, but also the actor's intentionality. In this way, the meaning and significance of behaviours or events are made accessible to the reader (Schultze & Avital, 2010, p. 3).

Finally, the concept of culture is also accommodated by the face-to-face interviewing and is essential for this research as the population being investigated herein is of an ethnic minority group. Yegidis and Weinbach, (2006) state for example that:

Aspects of specific cultures also may favour [sic] the use of the in-person interview. Because cooperation in interpersonal interactions is important in cultures that are more collectivistic, research participants who adhere to these values may respond more favorably [sic] to in-person data collection approaches than to less personal data collection approaches, such as questionnaires or telephone surveys. In many Hispanic cultures, personalismo is valued; that is, time is taken for people to get to know one another and trust is established before information (especially that of sensitive nature) is shared. The in-person interview is more conducive to this type of interaction and may increase rate of compliance with research protocols among people who hold this cultural perspective (Yegidis & Weinback, 2006, p. 150).

The interviews conducted, spanning anywhere between 60 – 90 minutes, functioned primarily as a means to extract information from the participants. Needless to say, an important element of these interviews was to also establish a rapport with the participants in order to make them feel comfortable enough as to allow them to speak openly about personal subject matter that they may not have otherwise been inclined to expose. As a researcher I had to be able to find a common ground with my participants, establish a level of confidence within them by creating an environment by which both researcher and participant could relate. This was done firstly by assuring the participants that any and all information retrieved by myself would remain completely confidential. The consent form outlining my academic intentions and the anonymity of my research assisted in reassuring the participants as well. The locations chosen for the interviews also helped to create an environment conducive to good rapport building. Each interview was conducted in a public place in order to simulate more of a casual encounter similar to two friends simply meeting up and exchanging stories, although the true motivations were of a different nature. There was no way of denying that the actual relationship was that of researcher and research subject, but I attempted to quell that line slightly by using more of an informal speech style, indicative of the use of Ebonics and slang terminology more frequently used in informal settings. Through the use of open public meeting places and the usage of more informal speech I believe I was able decrease my undertone as a researcher, in turn creating an environment which allowed the participants to speak more liberally and freely on their gang membership experiences.

5.3 Analysis

5.3.1 Narrative Analysis

The analytic method used for this exercise will be that of Narrative Analysis. Narrative Analysis looks to structure a narrative (regardless of its form). It uses the whole picture and segments it into a chronological order of events. The best way to describe the structure is by using the analogy of a story. Narrative Analysis is able to look at a narrative and identify, for instance, the beginning and character development portion of the story where the reader is able to identify who the hero and villain are. Like a story, a narrative also has a middle and climactic point, where a particular problem or conflict arises. This conflict

eventually leads to an end; the portion typically where there is a resolution to the story's conflict. This form of Narrative Analysis is labeled *Proppian Narrative Analysis* (after Vladimir Propp [Alasuutari, 1995]), which identifies the functions of a story, that which structures and guides it. Many narratives under this style of analysis can come to follow the same plot type, even those accounts resembling life course narratives (Alasuutari, 1995).

Consistent with the main theme of this paper, Alasuutari (1995) notes “an essential part of modern people's world experience is the idea of change and individual development with time” (p. 71). Since the idea of gang membership herein rests upon the notion of it being a process, it is important to consider the individual's narratives in their entirety rather than to pigeonhole one's analysis to one specific theme. For instance, within my analysis it will be crucial to consider the complete context of the narrative in order to open my perspective to the different dimensions that lay in the broader context (Alasuutari, 1995). This is to say that despite the fact that my study will focus on the trajectory of gang membership, with emphasis placed on the process of desistance, it is nonetheless important to also take into consideration the events which happen *a priori*, as preceding events are often as important in describing a phenomenon of a specific event, (the process of desistance) within the context of the whole narrative (Alasuutari, 1995).

Narrative Analysis is thought to be the most appropriate method for this study since the data is dependent upon the narratives of the participants. Although the role of the researcher is to direct the interviews in a particular direction, the more casual and conversation-like interviewing style used did not always render a narrative whereby the themes and events were told in an acute structured and chronological template. The use of this analytic style will allow this researcher to better organize the concepts and ideas found within the narratives of the participants in such a manner to create more fluidity and to better identify the process of the trajectory of gang membership that is taking place. Furthermore, as the narratives being told are representative of a short time frame within one's whole life history and hold resemblances to life course narratives, this method of analysis can more easily help to organize the accounts into plot structures allowing the researcher more ease to sift through the thick information obtained, eventually pin-pointing the key events and ideas that emerge as tantamount towards the process of desisting from gang membership.

The approach taken for this research is modeled after Lévi-Strauss' analysis of myths. The steps followed are those outlined by Paillé and Mucchielli (2010) in their heading "Structural analysis" found in the book *L'analyse Qualitative en Sciences Humaines et Sociales*. This particular narrative analysis method has five steps; to choose narratives that are structurally comparable; the breakdown of these narratives into sub-themes or sub-categories; the organization of the sub-categories into a coding frame; the extraction of meaning from the sub-categories and finally, the insertion of the meanings into the context of the research's intentions (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2010).

Although the method explained by Paillé and Mucchielli is what will frame the analysis for this study, other analytic tools of the Narrative Analysis type can be used to facilitate this method as well. This is to say that although there are a variety approaches to Narrative Analysis, they do not have to be used exclusively to one another. They should instead be thought of as tools in a toolbox rather than the toolbox itself in the construction of a solid analysis.

5.3.2 Choosing of Narratives

The Narratives were obtained by recording approximately 90 minute long interviews of Hispanic/Latino-Canadian males from the Greater Toronto Area. The interview questioning was directed concisely towards the phenomena of the trajectory of gang membership as experienced by the participants. Although the semi-structured interview style that was employed to conduct the interviews allowed for the participants to speak freely regarding their lived experiences and personal thoughts and feelings, the role of the interviewer was to assure certain fluidity in the interactive interviewing process. This was done by asking follow-up questions to expand on interesting ideas and/or statements, but also by re-directing the conversation when it appeared to have steered off topic.

Each participant was thoroughly informed about the subject matter that was to be discussed prior to actual participation in the interview and a consent form was also signed acknowledging that each participant understood the purpose of the research and voluntarily agreed to participate in sharing their experiences. Furthermore, an interview guide was

applied during the questioning to assure that each narrative would be structurally comparable for analytic purposes. Although not every question was asked identically or in the same order to each participant, the interview followed a structure based on the chronology (i.e. onset, commitment and desistance) of their experience of gang membership. Being that this research is focused on the process of desistance, it was imperative that each participant outwardly acknowledged that they no longer self-identified as a gang member. This is to say that only those interviews that adhered to the full process of onset, commitment and desistance were chosen for analysis in order to gain a perspective on the full trajectory of the identity of gang membership. Therefore, the narratives chosen for this analysis were comparable in the functions¹⁸ that guide the plot of the stories from beginning to end, as per the Proppian style of analysis (Alasuutari, 1995).

5.3.3 Narrative Sub-Categories

The process to come about sub-categorical headings is not extensively explained by Paillé and Mucchielli (2010) as this portion of the analysis is described as more of a trial and error process. Alternatively, Alasuutari's (1995) text *Narrativity* provided better guidance towards establishing strongly founded sub-categories derived from the narratives. Specifically, Alasuutari (1995) refers to Teun A. van Dijk (1980) and the *reductive macrorules* as a means to summarize a story. In order to come about sub-categories, Paillé and Mucchielli (2010) advise that an analyst must be on the search for functions. Functions are a general meaning category that can be applied to a specific action within the story similar to the Proppian notion of function (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2010). To arrive at a selection of general meanings I used the first two rules of the van Dijkian reductive macrorules model, that of *deletion/selection* and *strong deletion* which allowed me to come about a summary of the story. The summary then provided the key pivotal events of the narrative from where I was then able to draw my sub-categories for the Lévi-Straussian analytic approach.

¹⁸Functions are the occurrences within a story that follow a sequential order which guide the story from the beginning until the end. Vladimir Propp used this plot analytic style to reduce Russian folk tales into their core narrative elements (Alasuutari, 1995).

In the beginning process of deletion/selection, I was able to select the statements that corresponded best with my research topic. This selection was organized around highlighting and extracting the statements that made reference to the process of onset, commitment and eventually desistance from a gang. Everything that was not towards the intended focus of the research topic or pertinent to the research questions surrounding the trajectory of membership was thus deleted and omitted. The second step of strong deletion was to further delete statements which repeated previous ideas or descriptive information that did not further the main idea of the statement. This allowed me to keep my story summary short but concise, which also made it easier to decide upon what my core sub-categories would be. It is important to note here that the selected statements in both phases of selection and deletion maintained the exact wording as was spoken by the participants. I opted to keep these statements in their original form as to maintain the authenticity of how the words described the lived experiences. This resulted in a plot summary of the participants' narratives.

5.3.4 Coding Frame: Construction of Meaning

The coding frame is what organized the sub-categories and arranged them in a chronological order parallel to how the story was told. The specific frames identify an evolution of the story and identify what can be thought of as the beginning, middle and end of the story, or more profoundly, the transitional points in the identity development of the participants. The statements placed in the coding frames are my own interpretation of the key points which emerged out of the summaries. The summary stays true to the language used by the narrators, but once applied to the coding frame, passes through a subjective understanding of what these spoken phrases are to mean, or the significance of them. Since I interviewed the subjects personally, the process of meaning-making was co-constructed by participant and researcher alike, but this particular analytical model emphasizes the idea that meanings materialize from the narrative itself and not so much from the researcher (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2010). The subjective analysis of the researcher is not to be disqualified though, its importance is evident when trying to highlight the hidden meanings while deciphering through what can be the chaos of speech.

The coding frame provided a surface level of meaning-making which served to make sense of the statements that summarized the testimonies. The process of constructing meaning consists of taking the sub-categories found among the stories and to identify their link. This is to say that although the re-wording of the sub-categories passes through the subjective lens of the analyst, the meaning emerges from the narrative itself and can only be highlighted by the analyst (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2010). Finding the commonalities within the stories, which amounts to the placement of the sub-categories into the coding frame, is already a process of extracting the meaning that resides latently within the text itself. The *Lévi-Straussian* analysis model does involve interpretation on the part of the researcher, but is not supposed to impose meaning – but to extrapolate it from its place of origin within the narrative. To highlight this existent meaning is to once again find the commonalities amongst the sub-categories which were previously chosen. I had to group all four testimonial stories into a general story type based on their commonalities to provide me with a structure from where I could draw from in order to explain the findings of this research.

In order for this study's findings to acquire any sort of meaning the following section will present a condensed version of the participant's testimonials, the unique accounts of their personalized crossing through the auto-identification as a gang member. These stories will highlight the specific commonalities and differences that exist between each individual participant's experiences in order pave the way for an elaborated interpretation of the fluid trajectory of a deviant identity. Throughout this process, this exploration will make stops along the way to discuss what the participants perceived a gang to be, the significance of the momentous *Turning Points* which took place to eventually lead the individuals through the key aspects of *Onset*; *Commitment* and; *Desistance* of gang membership.

Chapter 6 – *Know your role homie: Discussion*

The results of my analysis from the gang member narratives sifted through the dialogues and organized the participant's thoughts and experience of gang membership into a story that was structured by a plot which guided the main character through his encountered turning points, eventually linking the story from the beginning to the climactic middle through until the point of desistance. Similar to fictional stories and movies, these narratives exposed a clear process of character development which brought the main character to their present understanding of self. Not only was the analysis able to summarize the events in an organized fashion but it managed to break the story down even further into its core elements. These elements became the meanings that were found within the told circumstances and the events which were not necessarily outwardly spoken, but that existed latently within the dialogues. It is these core elements *What is a gang* (from the participant's perspective): *Turning Points*; *Onset*; *Commitment* and; *Desistance* that will be the focus of the discussion herein. First off, before we venture into my interpretation of these core elements, let us begin this discussion by exploring them through the firsthand experience of the participants.

6.1 *Participant Stories*

Before an analysis can be discussed, it is important to describe to the reader the events of the participant's trajectory through gang membership. This portion of the paper is meant to provide to the reader the context from which the analysis was extracted. It aims to sketch the images as they were experienced by the actors themselves and to vividly illustrate their progressive journey through the identity of gang membership. By supplying the reader with a condensed version of what was revealed in the interview as the personal accounts of gang membership from the onset until the desistance, the comparisons will be easier to visualize and their differences and similarities more easily understood.

When the interviews were performed I allocated a number to the individuals based on the order in which they were interviewed to distinguish them from one another, as well as to maintain their anonymity. For the purpose of the following sections of this paper I will give

the individuals nick-names, chosen randomly by myself for ease of reference and literary flow. Hereinafter, for the purpose of this paper Participant 1 will be referred to as Alexis; Participant 2 as Claudio; Participant 3 as Arturo and; Participant 4 as Ernesto.

6.1.1 Alexis

Alexis arrived to Canada at a very young age and lived with his mother and sister. Being new to the country he recalled having a hard time adapting to his new environment. When asked to speak about the beginning of his involvement with gangs he replied

It all actually started with basically coming to Toronto. Single parent, you know, fucking, assistance from the government, this this and that. Having a hard time finding a place, plus all your family and shit. Mom working two jobs, no babysitter, home alone. So, when you are like 5 or 6 you start getting a general idea of what's happening, what's the real world, because you are exposed to a lot. You're not only exposed to day, you are exposed to night. You're not just exposed to good, you're exposed to a lot of bad and like I said earlier, when you first come to Canada... everybody are somewhere on Jane because those were the most common areas where there was cheap rent, cheap housing, where people with nothing, could fucking afford something.

He further explained that his mother had to work two jobs which caused for him to be out of the house for long periods of time. He admitted that due to this, he was able to take advantage of the time alone and wander the streets until late hours with no supervision, exposing himself to adult scenarios at a very young age. As he remembers:

We were running up and down the streets, I was never calling home, never coming back home after school, staying 9, 10, 11 outside, burning tires behind factories, breaking windows, fucking, just the adrenaline rush, that's when I started feeling. But then I saw like, a nightlife, cool people, because I saw a pool hall, I saw bars, all the cool people going there. So fucking, there was no age limit back then, so I used to go into bars and my friends would introduce me to these other people. Just them smoking cigarette, there was women around them, and alcohol, everybody was happy having fun. I wanted that life, I knew I could live that life.

Alexis and his family moved often which made it hard for them to feel a sense of establishment. Once Alexis reached the age of 10, he finally moved into a neighbourhood that he could consider home. The neighbourhood comprised of an apartment building complex where each building consisted predominantly of a different but specific race, yet

according to Alexis, the residents within the complex managed to maintain a strong sense of solidarity. At this time, Alexis was enrolled in school but rarely attended. When he did attend he got into many fights. As he recalls, “Ya, um, the school gave up on me, started giving me in-school suspensions, didn’t do nothing for me. They thought suspensions was vacations for me, I was fighting, I never did my homework ever in my life, ever in my life”.

Opting to stay out on the streets, Alexis learned how to fend for himself and took to drinking alcohol and smoking weed. The streets also provided him with the knowledge of how to earn money as well. Alexis looked back at when he first started learning the street trades and recounted a specific time when he was first introduced to more illicit activity than simple recreational drug usage and underage drinking. “I met this guy named G.D. He showed me something very interesting and that was how to get a gun and it was easy to rob people and nobody would report it because they were so scared. And for me it was very interesting how easy it was to get stuff but I never had the guts to hold a gun, at least at that age.” Although he had already begun to partake in deviant behaviours and illegal activity, he admits that this was done all on his own accord. The gang didn’t become present until he reached high school.

As a teen-ager Alexis was basically only attending school to make money. He recalls that he had already established a strong bond with people from his neighbourhood where most of their time would be spent hanging out, drinking and smoking. Around the same time, Alexis remembers that there were tensions between two rival gangs in the area. His predicament with this arose from the fact that where he was attending school was the turf of one gang and where he lived was the turf of the other rival gang. Due to these circumstances he was forced to choose which side to become allied with. “I had to pick a side,[x gang] or [y gang] because I was making money from [one] and getting assistance from the [other]. So I couldn’t have my cake and eat it too. So I chose where I lived”. This was the moment that Alexis recalled having to take on the gang membership. When asked if he had at all tried to avoid becoming a member, his response was,

I embraced it because when I was eleven my mom kicked me out of the house, or I left the house. I couldn’t take up any of her rules anymore, conditions, this, this, and that. It was hard, like I said, single mother, my grandparents would buy me one pair of running shoes a year. I was tired of it, so when I

was making money, fuck, I had “Jordan’s”, shoes, shorts, track pants, I was fourteen living the life. I left the house when I was fourteen, and that’s why I always thought about money, money, money, money, money, money, money, money. The bigger the clique, the bigger the loyalty, the bigger the family, the bigger the pot.

While asking Alexis about his time in the gang, much of the dialogue referred back to adrenaline causing activities, making money and having people to share the wealth with. There were also statements that highlighted the deep sense of loyalty that he held for his gang and his duty to represent the gang. This was done by “hold[ing] it down blue or else we are going to have problems...I was always on my blue.” One of the most clear statements that Alexis made during the interview that expressed his loyalty and commitment towards the gang member identity was when he said, “Ya I played the role as a brother, I played the role as a son, I played the role as a man, as a provider, I played the boyfriend role, but I always kept my “G” status on top. “G” status, I was always a “G”. I had to have that card.” He recognized that there were other circumstances that required for him to act out different roles, but his role of a gang member held a higher level of significance to him than the rest. He could be anything else, but first and foremost, he was a gangster.

Next to making money as a main activity, Alexis noted that partying played a big aspect in the gang lifestyle. Making thousands of dollars at a time would allow him to “party like a rock-star”. Yet this lifestyle attracted a lot of ill attention. It raised jealousy amongst some of his acquaintances and suspicion with the law. Alexis knew that his days on the adrenaline induced lifestyle were numbered. Alexis was eventually arrested, charged and sentenced to jail. It was this moment that sparked his period of self-reflection to reconsider how he was living prior. Alexis explains that jail was a major eye opener for him. He was witness to a lot of violence and saw someone almost die, simply for being from a rival neighbourhood than his attackers. On his first night in jail, Alexis admits, “the ‘Don’, that shit scared me. The first night, I’m not going to lie, I did cry. I held it, but I cried. I was actually just scared for the first time in my fucking life”.

Not only was Alexis scared, but he felt alone again, reverting back to how he felt when he first arrived to the country. Alexis said that the loyalty that he had given to his gang

while he was out was not being reciprocated while he was locked up. He passionately revealed to me the following,

That's when I was like, this shits fucking crazy – the loyalty, the family, it's all bullshit. It's overrated now. Everybody just wants to jump the wagon and ride along for the ride. Um, until shit hits the fan...Your word wasn't bond when it came down to it. So deep down inside you're living a lie and I didn't want to live that life anymore, I didn't want to be something that was just, not just negative, but imaginative...I've always put my hands in fire for a lot of people but that's changed because those people are not there for me anymore. So it's finally made me realize, listen, now it's time to do you, to see who you really are and what you're really capable of and you'll see how happy you are.

This appeared to be the moment that he realized that he did not want to return to his gang lifestyle and wanted to better the relationships that proved to be the most positive, those of his family members. Beyond all of the strife that he may have caused them while he identified himself as a gang member, they were nonetheless the ones who proved to be the most loyal to him.

Finally, when asked who he saw himself as now, Alexis responded, “I’m me. I’m me, I’m human, I’m your regular guy that wakes up in the morning, kicks his ass at work, comes back, you know, everyone has a drink here or there, I have my “spliff” just relax, play some PlayStation. Just call it a night man, wait for the weekend, just like everybody else. Work hard for another vacation. That’s it, that’s me now”. But as he also admitted, the “G” in him is still present, only he can now actively choose not to act out accompanied behaviours.

We can further summarize this account by noting that this participant and his family had difficulties assimilating to their new environment and culture. His mother was forced to work long hours in order to maintain the household which resulted in the participant having minimal parental supervision allowing for a high level of exposure to his surrounding environment and circumstances conducive to a deviant lifestyle. This individual furthermore sought to be perceived as cool amongst his peers and united with an established gang to acquire the means to earn the desired economic stability which aided this participant to achieve a status that allowed him to live a care-free and adrenalin filled party life-style which was considered cool. Finally, incarceration exposed him to a new sense of disloyalty from those he once believed to be his friends. While in jail he realized the possible perils of

gang membership which scared him enough to consider a change in life-style. He no longer identifies as a gang member but acknowledges the possibility of reverting back to that identity as needed.

6.1.2 Claudio

When I first met Claudio we met in the food court of a mall. We spoke briefly before the interview took place just to get a feel for each other, discussing our cultural backgrounds and some of the activities that we enjoy. Claudio also spoke about his current job and the position of manager that he held with his company, but as was later developed in the interview, Claudio was not always the type of person who could maintain a “nine to five”.

Claudio came to Canada at a young age with his family. Back in his home country he used to live quite comfortably, not well off, but better than middle class. Claudio remembered never lacking anything, especially not material objects. When his family arrived to Canada, their economic status was negatively affected. His family was no longer able to afford the same luxuries that they once had and struggled economically. Seeing this, Claudio quickly adopted a level of importance towards money.

When asked to speak on how he first got involved with gangs, Claudio acknowledged that he was already hanging out with a group of friends who he identified as also living within tough economic circumstances. Claudio recalls that at around this time there happened to be a lot of movies and music groups that came out that identified with the Latino gang culture. When he was asked if he could recall who was his biggest idol or role model at that time he responded, B-Real from the Latino based Hip-hop group whose music and lyrics was representative of the gang culture at those times. Claudio said;

90's was really targeting in gang violence, especially Latino gangs – so they all kind of had that message of Latino gang enrolment and it just kind of pushed me that way... A group of us – that we were all going through the same I guess lifestyle to a certain degree - we were just watching one of the movies that had a Latin gang in it and we were talking about it, you know it would be kind of cool if we did our own and even though it already existed in our school but we wanted to be our own crew and it wasn't too much

about being initiated to a gang, we were our own gang and we were initiating others into our gang.

The major motivation for Claudio and his group of friends to start a gang was due to the fact that they were not accepted into the already existing gang at their school. “This one gang – didn’t really want us to be part of their roles or activities and we were kind of left out. – and that was basically it, almost just to prove a point.” From this point Claudio and his friends started to distinguish themselves from the other group at school by wearing particular colours, and drawing graffiti representing their gang’s emblem, yet in these early stages the gangs did not exceed the main purpose of just hanging out. As Claudio explained, “I think at that point it was a commitment that you know we said we were going to do this and we tried to take as much time as possible to meet and be together at all times and sometimes that meant skipping class, just being outside”.

At this point in the interview it seemed like the best time to direct the conversation towards how his new found identity as a gang member began to take over. According to Claudio, he and his group of friends came to the decision that they wanted more notoriety. They didn’t want to just be labeled as wannabes from the already existing gangs, so they decided that they needed to do something drastic in order to call attention to themselves. As Claudio explained to me, there were two better known gangs that already existed at his school, both being distinguished predominantly by their race, the Spanish gang and the Black gang. The gangs maintained their distance from one another, they even had separated entrances and exit points in the school as to not cross each other. Claudio remembered that his group of friends decided to ambush the black gang at their side of the school and pick a fight. Although their group was much smaller, they knew that fighting that group with the vulnerability of having less people, they would finally earn a reputation. As Claudio stated:

After that fight, everybody knew what I did in that fight and it wasn’t pretty. And not only that but I was already in the drug movement and I was really well recognized for that. That was my point that my status got higher. I took it in and accepted it, that’s my role. People are now looking up to me, even though I was one of the younger ones and I knew right there and then that’s what I wanted to do and I was going to keep going higher and the sky was my limit.

Now committed to the gang member role that he had established, not only did he have to find ways to maintain his reputation, but also how to strengthen it. From his early experience of not having much money as a child he decided that he would dedicate himself to assure that he did not have to revisit that same childhood feeling. Claudio revealed that his means to do this were by selling drugs. This was his strength and his ability to earn money was so strong that at a very young age he had earned being in one of the top positions. This meant that he had in a sense been desensitized to the harsh realities of that lifestyle and the dangers that came along with it. His reputation and his status were the most important things to him and he would protect it at all costs.

There has always been jealousy, you know, people wanting to be on top because it's a dog eat dog world. Especially in the gangs and even so with my closer friends, when we first started it was just five of us and some of the guys just felt like they were in shock of seeing me grow so fast and being younger than them as well. So, of course you always have to watch your back, definitely... People change and having said that, there is a lot of gang members that I once called brothers or my brother but yet I still had to put an eye out for them or an eye out just to make sure that they don't go behind my back.

While Claudio did admit that being a gang member at that time was his primary role and the understanding of his core self, he also did play other roles. Claudio explained to me that when he attended family functions he did not try to hide his gang membership, but that he would not act with those same mannerisms. He treated everyone with unconditional love and respect and was clear on his familial morals and values, although he was a gang member, at home, he was still Claudio as his family knew him. Additionally, Claudio had also been in a romantic relationship, he also played the role of a lover.

Early on in his relationship, his partner became pregnant with his first child. The pregnancy was what brought Claudio and my conversation to the topic of desistance from gang membership. Claudio chose to start this topic by admitting that once he realized that he was going to be a father, his behavior and the potential for danger that his lifestyle promoted began to scare him.

We got in depth with the fighting and the turf calling, like claiming turf. There were a lot of battles, a lot of brutal battles, gory battles to the point where I even ended up having a death wish on me from another gang. That scared me,

knowing that it's out there and one day I might be dead. – it was just taking a toll on me and I was already thinking that “ok I really need to do something about it...I was about 18. We were dating for about a year and then after she got pregnant, that's the turning point right there. Where I'm thinking ok I'm going to be a dad, would I want my son to go through this too and obviously I didn't. That's when I knew, ok I've got to do something different.

The possibility of facing death while knowing that he was going to be a father sparked an internal desire for change within Claudio. Earning money was still going to be an important aspect in his life, but now for different reasons. Money was no longer going to symbolize power and status, but instead, the well-being of his family. The question remained, how would he do this.

Not having maintained a legitimate job any reasonable amount of time before, and not being accustomed to the workplace environment, Claudio explained that resorting back to selling drugs was at times the only means by which he managed to keep food in his fridge and a roof over his head, yet he was decided and determined to change. Seeking advice and guidance Claudio obtained counseling which helped to understand and embrace his potential. According to Claudio the counselor managed to enlighten him that even though he was un-aware of it, the skills that he had learned on the streets could quite easily be applied to the job force.

You know you have a lot of skills that meet exactly to the same requirements that a manager would need. Have you ever thought of doing that, a supervisor role. And I said no, and he was the one that got me into it and I prepared myself for it.

Today Claudio is a manager with a sales focused company. He motivates his staff to make sales, he organizes pay-roll and disciplines employees when necessary, much of what he did while he was a gang member as well. Not only that, but Claudio also does a lot of community work speaking up about the perils of gangs and gang membership in an attempt to divert troubled youth from following the same path he took towards gang membership. Most importantly to him, he is a proud father of two and hopes to do as good a job as his father did with him, who according to Claudio, is his new role model.

Finally, when asked if he ever saw his past gang member identity resurfacing he responded by saying:

“I don’t think it would call me back, but it definitely sometimes triggers something in my brain when I go and I’m on the bus let’s say and I see the same gang that we built, because I know it still exists and they tagged it on the bus and I see it and I’m like wow, this thing is still kicking. Like we started that, so that’s something that, it kind of in a weird way makes me feel proud, like “ya that’s right, that was me” but at the same time it’s like oh man, I can’t believe it like what did I do.

To summarize this account we note that the participant could no longer live the same luxuries as he once did in his native country. As a youth he became inspired by Latin gang movies and music, he became motivated to make a name for himself in a similar fashion as portrayed by the media influences. Procedurally, the participant established notoriety for himself as a gang member and had to work hard to maintain a high status and position within the gang. A great portion of his membership was being able to provide for himself and others which ultimately gave him a sense of pride and feeling of importance. Finally, maintaining his status became too stressful and having children made him appreciate his new role as a father making him realize that his gang membership would not be conducive to fulfilling his fatherly role. Although he no longer identifies as a gang member, he still acknowledges that he must fulfill some of the same roles in his employment position as he did while he was a gang member.

6.1.3 Arturo

Arturo began his account by recalling how quickly he had to assume adult roles at a young age. His parents, having been new to the country worked long hours and multiple jobs to maintain the household. For Arturo, this meant that some of the parental roles were left for him to fulfill by preparing meals for his younger siblings, assuring their attendance at school while also making sure that they got home safely and completed their homework. As Arturo stated “It was pretty hard for my parents, because they had just come to the country, Canada, doing two jobs, have three kids and on the other hand, I was like an adult not living a child life or not living a teenager life, I was living as an adult”. Arturo soon came to sense as though the role that he was fulfilling for his siblings on behalf of his parents was absent from his own life and admitted to the gang as having been an option to replace that familial

feeling that was missing in his life. When asked what a gang meant to him in his perspective Arturo replied:

The definition of a gang in my eyes is family. It's being there for your other family member. For instance, my way of getting into a gang, I never really had a real family there. I never had a father figure so the gang was there and a lot of people who are in the gang go into the same situation as me and we have a lot to relate so we build a charisma between each other so we are always there for one another...But being in a gang there is, they are there for you. They are there for you at a basketball game, they are there for you when you are in problems, when you need help with a job or you need certain things to be done, they are there for you, they have your back regardless. Some parents just wasn't there.

According to Arturo, there was a strong presence of gangs in the neighbourhood that he grew up in, but he never felt any pressure to join. When asked about how he first became involved with gangs Arturo described it as a natural process. As he remembered the beginning process Arturo said:

It was natural because it was growing around me. So it was like, there was offers, I chose not to, that offer was with somebody else but I chose not to go with them and it's just that the people that I grew up with and we had been going around and hanging around and hanging around and then the other people they were like gang affiliated and we just got into a thing that they never asked me, there was never pressure. It was just me by choice. I felt the love with them, and that's the whole thing. Is that knowing myself and knowing my surroundings, who I could trust and who I knew was there for me. The ones that always called me and asked me to come with them, I knew would never be there for me. So there is no trust within themselves and the people they associate with, so when I joined mines, I had the trust. There was association, there was a thing like I said earlier, we could bond on that. There was a stronger charisma between one another so there was like a secret society in a way. Because we could hold that trust with one another.

Similar to the other participants, Arturo also recalled a specific moment as to when he came to consider himself as part of a gang. According to Arturo:

It got down to a point one of the members was in a problem and it got down to a point that they asked a favour back because I was in a situation and they were there for me. And when it got down to a point I had a basketball game to go to and I was supposed to play but I ended not going to that thing because the family needs there help. So I had to miss out on that day to go help them do what they had to do.

Here, as evidenced by Arturo the loyalty held towards the gang was stronger than that of his basketball team, being the first instance in which Arturo remembered having made a conscious decision to choose to participate with the gang over any of the other roles that he played at the time. Furthermore, and as was also indicated by this participant, once basketball season finished, he found himself hanging out more and more with his peers from the gang, at which point he was able to declare himself as a “full-fledged certified gangster”.

When asked about his commitment to the gang Arturo went on to make inferences that indicated that it was similar to people’s commitment to their family. In one occasion Arturo explained that in his house hold he never felt much support or encouragement for the pursuit of his dreams. Although Arturo had now come to consider himself as a gang member, he still dreamed of finishing school and becoming a successful lawyer. Arturo’s parents either did not understand the importance of school or thought that Arturo’s dreams were unattainable and somewhat unrealistic and encouraged him instead to find employment to help support the household instead. As was told in Arturo’s account:

...with the gang now you have that love and you have that support. With a family, when you are within your home, you tell your dad or so, this is what I want to be or this is what I want to try to be. It was like “why don’t you try to be this”. There was always like a shutdown. When you are with the gang it was always like, “go for it” try doing it. There was like, ya you could live your normal life but remember, this is the lifestyle we are living. We are still as a family, there is a love there and there was like, everybody has a goal. Everybody has something to reach to. No matter what how somebody out there could try to stop your goal. Well they would never make that happen to make your goal stop. Everybody is trying to educate one another, everybody is trying to help one another, we were there for each other and no matter what it is there was a strong love and that’s how it was. It was just a very strong love and their love was there and it doesn’t matter what it is, it was there...Like I said there was so much stuff as a young person who wants to do but you can’t do because of time. Time don’t wait for nobody. And you’ve got to look at it like, the motivation, what I wanted to be, I wanted to be a lawyer and being in and doing certain things, to be a lawyer, you’ve got to know how to do your time to do your study, to deal with your sister, to take care of the home duties and every little thing. So what happened is that I had friends that they knew my household so when I be doing my studies and stuff, they be helping me out by looking out for my sister or stuff like that. And they were girls too, so it worked out. So it gave me a stronger motivation because they helping and we just feed off of each other. That’s how it just went down.

Aside from the motivation and moral support that the gang was able to provide to Arturo to strive towards accomplishing his dreams, the gang also provided an economic opportunity that his biological family could not. In order to pursue his dream of going to college or university he knew that he would have to come up with the economic resources to pay for the courses, for which his parents could not provide. Since, as Arturo explains, other members were also determined to accomplish their own goals (some of whom have gone on to become doctors), the gang bound together to give one another a sense of economic stability. As Arturo recalled:

You start realizing that hey, my pops was always on me about going to work. I didn't want to work. I wanted to go to school, my mind was on my dream. So it was like pushing me out to do something to go work and do this and I was like hey wait a minute, this is so hypocritical because is this how the world is supposed to be now? Like push your kid out to go work, what about that kid having a goal? Having a future, doing what they want to do in their life but they never went to go do for themselves so now it's like what? I gotta live their life because they didn't have the opportunity? That's what I had to look at and say, hold up, life cannot be like this. So when I started making money by doing otherwise it was, like I was making more money than my dad and he's working. But at the same time it was like saving up to tell myself, to go to college, this is my college money, this is my university money. I just got to a point when there was no sense of me depending on them because they are pushing me out to go work, they are trying to tell me that they don't have my college money to go pay for it. It's good for you to do your school work, get the high grades but it was like winning a lottery ticket, one in a million to get that grand. How much hoops do you have to jump through to get that grand. So life is just a chance. You look at it, you can do the math, tell yourself, you're in a gang, it's a big establishment. So if you set that up, everybody work together and if we all put funds each and every one of us could go to college. So there was a goal set out, it was just the risks.

During his time in the gang Arturo was also arrested and charged with a criminal offence, resulting in a jail sentence. Unlike other participants, jail did not deter Arturo's gang member identity or make him reflect on the consequences that his gang member lifestyle could result in. According to Arturo, the major factor that initiated the desistance from his gang membership was the birth of his son, and wanting to be present as a major influence in his child's life. The deeper Arturo got involved with the gang, the more risk became involved. Although the street was where he went to be with his gang and make his money, every night became a challenge as to how he would get back home safely. The birth of his

child sparked the severity in the gang membership lifestyle that he was leading and accounted for his desire to change.

While battling the two identities of gang member and father, Arturo was inspired by a family member of his who leads a productive and legitimate lifestyle. He came to notice that they both came from similar upbringings but came to realize through the experiences of his family member that it is indeed possible to change. He came to learn the value of working a legitimate job and not feeling ashamed for it. Through this he can still provide for his child and be the role model that he sees himself as, but without the threatening risks attached to his gang membership.

In the case of this participant, having to become accustomed to a new cultural environment the participant's parents worked long hours which limited family cohesion in the home. In turn, the participant felt as though he needed to seek elsewhere the sense of support that was not felt in the home environment. In his pursuit he began making more money than his father by being in a gang which gave him a sense of importance and accomplishment and found that he had to continuously earn money to protect his reputation amongst his peers. Finally, by becoming a father he realized that juggling the two identities of father and gang member became too stressful. The participant no longer saw fit to commit the same mistakes as his father did with him and decided that he had to leave the gang lifestyle in order to be a better provider and role model to his son. This is to say that having a family and being a good father became a bigger sense of accomplishment than the amount of money he could earn while being a gang member.

6.1.4 Ernesto

Ernesto's experience of gang membership seemed to begin with an acute sensation of isolation. Although Ernesto was able to identify with his brother and the sequence of his mother's romantic partners as examples of the role models that he had as a young child, he nonetheless maintained repressed feelings from the environment that devoured his conscious level of understanding at that point of his life. Ernesto explains:

I'm subjected to some type area, some type of race, some type of class identity that I might not even identify myself with. Right, because being Latino, being born here, I never really identified with the Latino community in terms of when I went to Venezuela or the first time I went to South America, Cuba right, was that I could identify myself physically with these people but linguistically or culturally I couldn't really adapt or relate to them. Because although my parents were Hispanic they never really grew me up to be Hispanic or to try to accept that identity. The identity that was created for me here was more of Anglo-Saxon identity to essentially conform to the ideals of society. You know it's, it's a difficult situation for a lot of, especially people from a Latino community that were either born here or grew up here as a youth to really find their own identity.

Following the bad examples of his mother's romantic partners who, as he explained were either ex-convicts or people with issues of substance abuse, Ernesto quickly found himself also participating in delinquent behavior.

...a lot of these delinquent behaviour that I started having when I was a youth really reflected these individuals because that was really my male role model besides my brother. So I'm looking at these guys as like a father figure to show me what's right and show me what's wrong. You know just that alone made me, not aware, but just didn't really give a fuck. It was just like, "if these guys are going to thief shit, I'm going to thief shit". If I'm in the hood, I can do what I want in the hood

This is to say that it was not that gang that fostered his delinquency but what might have made him attractive to the gang as a potential member. Prior to becoming part of a gang, Ernesto recalls that a particular gang had already made attempts to lure him in by offering to him the economic opportunity of selling drugs. Initially, he declined their offer simply for lack of interest. The onset of his gang membership however was marked by a falling out that he had with his mother. As Ernesto recalled:

...a situation that happened with my mom and we ended up kicking off or what not. I met these guys from the hood, maybe a couple weeks prior or what not and they asked me to come sell some drugs for them so initially I was like nah, nah, nah. And then when I kicked off with my mom I was just like, yo know, I got kicked out of the house and what not so I was like yo this is the only real opportunity that I have to not live on the streets. So I ended up connecting with these cats and then they were basically I guess, organized, you know an organized gang or what not, an organized criminal syndicate and basically I just started flexing with those guys and with them cats.

Similar to the other respondents, the gang not only offered the individual a safe place and to bond and identify with others, but also the opportunity for the actor to grow as an individual within his unique circumstances. The gang sowed the seed for the individual to earn a reputation and to strengthen his self-esteem. What allowed Ernesto to commit to his gang was the reputation that he was building for himself and the want to not only maintain that reputation but to also build it even stronger. Ernesto remembered that:

It's like when you're trying to get your respect from your boss, and you are the hardest worker. You want to show them that you're the best employee, right so to show them that you're the best employee you're going to do what they say and that's basically the same type of concept in terms of gang membership. You still that hierarchy that you know, you have to follow certain orders. You have to do certain things that you may not personally want to do. But just on the basis of the fact that you want that respect, you want to get that promotion. You want to be where that guy is, so you want to do whatever he is doing and that's essentially how I adapted to that whole situation.

Ernesto was at the height of his membership when he was able to have his own apartment and the respect of his peers all the while by maintaining a care-free lifestyle, but as was told in his account to me in his interview, this did not last. Ernesto quickly started getting arrested and being sentenced to jail. At first his peers would bail him out which allowed for Ernesto to not be locked up for very long. According to him though, the last time he was sentenced he was told from his fellow gang member that they were not going to bail him out to teach him a lesson as he was attracting too much attention to him by the police and by extension, to the rest of his gang. Being locked away for a long period of time he recalls was the event that allowed for him to reflect on his current situation allowing for his decision to no longer want to be a part of the gang lifestyle. What stood out most to Ernesto in his time of reflection was the lack of loyalty that he felt once he was incarcerated and the feeling of isolation he once again came to feel as a result of it. According to Ernesto, he received very few visits or letters from those that he once felt dedicated to and thought were dedicated to him. As he expressed:

You know you think people that got your back, you know, they ain't got your back, they don't even put a dollar in your canteen. Meanwhile you're putting thousands of dollars in their pocket, right so, that was my self-realization...It's just a continuous cycle of bullshit until you get out of the game and then you get to realize how much shit that you really fucked up your

life or fucked up other people's lives right and you know that's when it really hits home when you see the damage that you've actually done to your community, you've done to yourself, you've done to your family, you know what I'm saying and um, that's one of the things that kind of hit me.

Having realized that he was out of sight and thus out of mind from those he was once strongly loyal to, Ernesto realized that he had to make a change. Once he was released from his sentence he decided to cut off all ties with the people that he once associated with and to gain a different perspective. Ernesto chose to go back to school and now identifies himself as an academic and pursues enlightening himself on our current social issues. He also dedicates much of his time to helping youth abstain from the path towards gang membership through his community service work.

Herein we saw that the participant's lack in positive male role models coupled with a sense of non-belonging, influenced by the mother's multiple romantic partners his older brother's involvement in minor criminal activity that led to Ernesto's own delinquency which was aimed at fulfilling the external pressures to strive for the media's depiction of success. Furthermore we can note that his joining a gang acquired him a new sense of independence by being economically self-sufficient and earned a reputation based on how he acquired his money. In order to protect his relevance and reputation within the gang the participant had to continuously "work" even if it meant doing things that he did not personally agree with. By the end of the account we saw that incarceration showed him the disloyalty that existed amongst those he once believed to be his friends and that he no longer wanted to risk his freedom for the benefit of people who did not have his best interest in mind. Furthermore, incarceration provided the participant with the time necessary to come about a self-realization regarding the ill effects that his previous actions caused himself and his community.

After being exposed to these experiences of gang membership we can see that each of these stories were unique accounts that cannot be duplicated. They do however hold some resemblances, especially in regards to the noted turning points defining their trajectories. For instance, that which was visible throughout was the participant's feeling of exclusion and marginalization. Yet while Alexis, Claudio and Ernesto felt socially excluded, Arturo expressed feelings of feeling alienated from his immediate family. It was then learned that

the suppression for this feeling was found in the gang, which, subsequently provided the location for both their solace and self-reinvigoration. It also came to light that two of the participants acknowledged that the main reason for leaving the gang stemmed from having spent time in jail and a sense of loss of loyalty, while the other two attributed their re-orientation to the birth of their children and the want to be good fathers.

Beyond any of the similarities and differences that can be attributed to all of the accounts throughout, the major aspect to highlight is that each participant's reality of gang membership was created through a continuous process whereby each individual adapted their interactions along with a continuous flow of events, circumstances and environments that they were each confronted by. It was by this unique sequence of events in each of the participant's stories that they were guided along the trajectory of gang membership, from onset through commitment, up until desistance.

6.2 What is a gang for them?

Continuing this discussion with the participant's personalized conceptualization of what a gang is I believe is the most appropriate method to escort the reader towards the meanings that have surfaced regarding their unique trajectories of gang membership. Recognizing firstly how the participants have come to understand the term gang based on their experiences can only help in the further comprehension of what will later be discussed in this section as the fundamentals of their process through gang membership.

If we recall earlier portions of this paper, it was noted that a clear consensus regarding a definitive and universal definition of the term *gang* is not yet available. Ball and Curry (1995) outlined that definitions are arrived at to appease the specific intentions of those using the term, while Wortely (2010) maintained that although there are many inconsistencies within the definitions used by the academics and professionals alike, they nonetheless assume that a degree of criminal activity must be present for a gang to be accurately described as such. Interestingly, Ernesto pointed out in his interview that it is not necessarily only the criminalized population that characterizes the gang label, but by following those loose definitions already set in place, other groups must also be considered. When asked to share his definition of what a gang is Ernesto stated, "I would say an organized group that is involved in some kind of criminal activity within modern day society. So I think, for example, different groups of people are sometimes perceived as being gangs but we can also look at our own local law enforcement agencies as being gangs as well". If we begin to consider the recent events of the shootings of Sammy Yatim in Toronto and more recently of Michael Brown in St. Louis, to arrive at a more specific and accurate definition of the term *gang* would potentially also mean that we need to be more inclusive of the types of groups that get labeled under the gang umbrella.

Furthermore, if we consider the thoughts of Ayling (2011) and Sanchez-Jankowski (1995), the utility of an all encompassing singular definition is ineffectual since gangs hold an evolutionary rather than a static nature and are continuously adapting to their surroundings and endlessly redefining themselves. From the gaze of the outsider it would appear that there are an exponential amount of elements to consider while trying to impose a

meaning onto the term, but none of us who have remained on the outskirts of this specific subculture can incorporate the experiential value of what a gang really is.

When the research participants were asked to give me their definition of what a gang means to them, they all responded in like fashion, all similarly attesting to the notion that their gang was “like a family”. For example, Alexis outwardly responded “A gang was a family, it was a family. It was more than your friends, it was people you could rely on, turn to, have your back, you know, that was a gang, family”. Similarly Claudio also noted that a gang “is more or less a family. A brotherhood of people that can watch each other’s back, that have the same mentality, and the same point of views and also the same goals to a certain degree”. In accordance, Ernesto also alluded to the same idea when he stated:

The definition of a gang in my eyes is family. It’s being there for your other family member. For instance, my way of getting into a gang, I never really had a family there. I never had a father figure so the gang was there and a lot of people who are in the gang go into the same situation as me and we have a lot to relate so we build a charisma between each other so we are always there for one another.

Yet, as predictive and as trite that this response might appear the merit of such a response resides in the simplicity. As the interviewer I was granted the opportunity of brief exposure to their experiences of gang membership, and through our dialogue I was able to come to comprehend the intricacies that dwell in such a simple statement.

As it became aware to me through the testimony of my participants, to the gang member, gangs, like the family, the church or the school system is just another social institution, a location where certain individuals venture to acquire and learn self worth amongst many other things. The gang teaches a set of morals and values such as respect as well as loyalty which is often times demonstrated through the unattested support for their fellow gang members by following the unwritten code of “riding until the casket drops or [until] the wheels fall off”, as was explained by Alexis in his account.

In an individualized society, the gang for the gang member is where he achieves a sense of inclusivity and belonging. This was indicative when Claudio mentioned his feelings of not belonging,

In our high school that we were going to we were recognized as the Latino group but there was always this one gang that was really well known and they kind of, well I'm not going to say excluded us, but they kind of didn't really want us to be part of their roles or activities and we were kind of left out. We were like you know what, we don't need them, we'll do our own thing and show them that we can do the same thing. And that was basically it, almost just to prove a point

In cases like those of my participants and specifically that of Ernesto, until he became part of a gang, he was never able to adopt the feeling of belonging even in the natural environment of the home and of his neighbourhood. Furthermore, considering the advantages of other institutions such as that of the workforce, according to the participants the gang offers opportunities of advancement as well as to be looked at in high esteem by one's peers. It also provides the individual a chance to achieve an isolated understanding of a measure of success. What is more, gangs have the capability to offer an escape from a reality that is perceived to be constraining to one's personal growth and sense of achievement. It offers the allure of freedom to choose one's own adventures in a society that is dictated by regimented boundaries. Alternatively, one of the biggest things associated with family is love and understanding, interestingly enough; none of the participants spoke at any great length or at all about love. Instead, respect was the single most sought element of achievement and was treated as having the most amount of value in terms of social capital.

Unfortunately, what was just described was the understanding of what a gang is from the perspective and experiences of ex-gang members, we therefore cannot bottle and label this and sell it in bulk. Reason being, it only describes the meaning of what a gang was while they were members and not what it is as non-members. One of the most critical questions that was asked by one of my respondents when I proposed he give me his definition of a gang was; "then or now?". This question has clear implications of the level of malleability of our conceptual understandings of gangs – even for those who have participated in them. For a single individual to be able to give two different accounts based on the same process of events, alludes to the notion that one's perception of the reality associated with a particular identity is always subject to change depending where on the axis they find themselves in the process of transitioning either towards or away from that identity. In Alexis' account his idea of what a gang was while he was a member was very much the glamorized description of the happy family full of adrenaline and excitement. When considering a definition as a

non-member, his response reached an opposite polarity: For Alexis now, “a gang is nonsense. It is overrated”.

Therefore, to better understand what a gang is, at least for those who participated in my research, would be to say that a gang is whatever the individual participating in it wants it to be. The gang supplies the individual with what other social institutions have failed to provide for the individual, whether it is a brotherhood, a sense of belonging, achievements, a place to relax or a combination of all of the above and then some. Nevertheless, the personal understanding of what a gang is will continuously evolve and develop in congruence with the high or low levels of saliency of the specific identity acted upon by any one individual actor.

6.3 *Turning Points*

As has been mentioned previously in this paper, the trajectory of gang membership has been broken down into three principal sections depictive of specific procedural segments; onset, commitment and desistance. Since it is in this fashion that the research has organized the events, it seems only fitting that this discussion follow the same procedure to explain the extrapolated evidence. It seems noteworthy to mention once again that the abovementioned events, although being analyzed in fragmented sections, nonetheless belong to a continuous stream of action whose fluidity is accented and maintained by the linking passages that have herein been deemed *Turning Points*. These events found within the participant’s experiences are crucial features that act as the adhesive that bonds an individual’s isolated occurrences along a continuum that highlights the idea of the trajectory of gang membership as being an ongoing process. In this discussion this concept will thus take on the guiding principle as a means to sustain its importance and relevance to the procedural events already identified.

Tuning points in the context of this paper can be understood as *Epiphanies*. Epiphanies according to Sutterluty (2007) are “revelatory moments in a person’s life that show his or her character in a new light in unique, often critical situations” After an epiphanic experience, or so the concept implies, a person is irrevocably changed. In

subjective terms, the actor goes through a status passage and relates to himself in an entirely new way (Sutterluty, 2007, p. 275).

This portion of the process of desistance was chosen to be discussed first as it is the *Turning Points* that binds the three stages of onset, commitment and desistance together. These are the events that took place either as a major event or cumulatively which cued the construction and later on the desistance from the gang member identity. As has been noted by many (Laub, Nagin & Sampson, 1998; Mulvey et al, 2004; Laub& Sampson, 2001; Farrall & Bowling, 1999) there tends to be key momentous occasions that must occur during the individual's life course to promote change in an individual's criminal tendencies. The events act as highlighted moments in the flow of continuous action that spark internalized self-reflection. For some individuals these moments take the form of becoming involved in serious romantic relationships or obtaining a job which they are motivated by and, as was the case of two participants in this study, through the birth of their child. These events are elements that can (but do not always) change the dynamics of the individual's social context.

A new father may start to behave in a way that he believes others expect him to behave; in the "conventional" way that a father should behave. By doing so he is adhering to his reference groups, for example he is not behaving how he thinks he should behave, but rather, he is behaving how he assumes others believe he should behave (Charon, 2010). Similarly, instead of drawing courses of action based on the expectations of his peers, he may instead begin to relate better with his own father or other father figures he has come to accept or imagine. Claudio, after having his own child began to acknowledge his own father as his role model instead of his previous role model who was a music artist. Having a child allowed him to relate to the role that his father fulfilled and used that image as a base from where to draw his actions, modifying his behaviour in the same role. Furthermore, Ernesto, after spending time in jail began to idolize Hugo Chavez and embraced what he came to define as positive and humanitarian qualities. In effect he internalized these qualities and aspired to imitate those same qualities while interacting with underprivileged youth in his environment.

Although the participants in this study faced similar events which they deemed imperative towards their change of character, both towards and away from the gang identity, turning points are a subjective experience that may not affect everyone in the same light. For

instance, Both Alexis and Ernesto found that their turning point towards the desistance from their gang identity was due to their time spent in jail that revealed the sense of disloyalty by their peers and replacing it with the solitude that they confronted while incarcerated. Alternatively, Arturo also went to jail but was not affected by it in the same manner. His turning point was the birth of his child and the self-realization that he did not want his child to have the same relationship with him, as he had with his own father. Considering the role of the turning points as transitional portals through the stages allows for a better understanding of the stages themselves through a Symbolic Interactionist perspective which will now be explored.

6.4 Onset

The onset of the gang member identity was found to be characterized mainly by the difficulties experienced by immigrant families or by first generation Canadians to assimilate to Canadian culture. Miller, Barnes and Hartley (2011) explored Hispanic gang membership in the Southwest of the United States in the context of acculturation. For these authors acculturation is, “the process wherein two distinct cultures come into contact resulting in significant changes in one or both” (p. 333). Some of the difficulties experienced can be due to the standardized testing and accreditation systems in place that act as barriers to most immigrant professionals trying to find work closely related to the professions they left back home (Chettleburgh, 2007). By not being accustomed to the Canadian idiosyncrasies in the workforce specifically, this also limits the types of jobs that can be obtained (usually restricted to positions of manual labour), which in turn can affect the quality of life that they live in their new environment. This was highlighted when Claudio expressed that not living the same standard of life in Canada as he did in his native country became a cause for distress. He stated:

...my own family alone didn't have a lot of money at that point and we struggled a lot with a lot of things at home so I saw the need for money and the thing is it was weird for me growing up because I grew up having a lot of things you know, I lived back home, we had two houses, the maids, the car, but when we moved back here we were left with nothing. So growing up having all of that, and then one day your parents telling you “I can't afford it” it didn't make sense, so basically it was a mind fuck.

Additionally, and perhaps one of the most limiting aspects of acculturation to new comers to the country is the language barrier. For many, the immediate need to earn a living means that many immigrants cannot spend the time to learn the language to a sufficient standard as required by many employers. This causes them to have to take on positions that do not require any formal language skills which are typically low paying positions. In order to make ends meet, parents often have to take on multiple jobs which ultimately require them to spend less time in the home. To this affect Arturo noted that:

Some parents just wasn't there. For instance, it was pretty hard for my parents, because they had just come to the country, Canada, doing two jobs, have three kids... My parents could never really relate to them the way I related to my sisters.

Not only would the language barriers limit the types of jobs that were available to members of immigrant families, but it would also affect their relationship with other social institutions such as schools. Miller, Barnes and Hartley (2011) note that “negative educational experiences may be even more pronounced for Hispanics owing to language and cultural barriers” (Miller et al., 2011:336) which is exemplified by Alexis when he remembered that he could not be helped with his homework as his mother could not understand the teacher’s instructions. He also offered the experience that when the school would call his home either because he had gotten into trouble or because he did not show up for school, the issues could not be addressed as the incidents could not be communicated or received properly by his mother. After many failed attempts at communicating, the school finally ceased calling his house completely.

The trouble faced by families at acculturating to the Canadian society has the negative effect of creating a sense of social distance or marginalization (Miller et al., 2011). As Miller Barnes and Hartley (2011) also acknowledged “unacculturated youth are more likely to be marginalized from mainstream society, resulting in their conscious rejection of the conventional social order and in the creation of an alternative social world (i.e. the gang)” (p. 333). This idea was also expressed directly by Alexis when he stated:

Ya, um, the school gave up on me, started giving me in-school suspensions, didn't do nothing for me. They thought suspensions was vacations for me, I was fighting, I never did my homework ever in my life, so in grade 7 they did a test on me to see if I'm smart or whatnot and then they got the results back

their biggest mistake was telling me I had the equivalency of a grade eleven year old. So, that boosted up my ego and I said "fuck I'm smarter than the system". That's when I started realizing the system has some kind of control on you and what's the system? The education, the cops, the government, so now I saw who the man was. Stick it to the man that's how I thought.

The marginalization felt through the difficulties of assimilation to Canadian norms and values reminds new Canadians of their perceived inferior status every time they are required to interact with mainstream society. In instances when newcomers leave their areas of residence (typically in low income housing neighbourhoods), the differences in comparison to middle and upper class neighbourhoods are extremely evident, which only helps to impede the process of acculturation as it only adds to the feelings of distinction between *Us* and *Them*. Miller, Barnes and Hartley (2011) go on to say that,

...the stresses and pressures of living in a disadvantaged neighbourhood and experiencing an adverse home environment exacerbate Hispanic youth's feelings of being marginalized to the fringes of society...Those who are low in acculturation or otherwise slow or unwilling to assimilate are confronted time and again with individuals or contexts from the majority culture, which reaffirm their disadvantaged position in the social order (p. 334).

First generation Canadians may also feel this sense of marginalization in the sense that being that they are Canadian born, they may not entirely feel represented by the customs and practices held in the family home, but outside of the home they also learn that they are not representative of the dominant culture. Gabriel Gutierrez (2000) notes the effects that the media, specifically the industry of Disney, has on forwarding the dominant ideologies in regards to race and class. From a young age we, as consumers of media, are exposed to and made to believe the stratification between whites and non-whites and the classification of ethnic minorities as inferior (Gutierrez, 2000). The idea of the feeling of non-belonging also creates a sense of powerlessness and marginalization, as well as a lack of identity. Ernesto states to this effect:

...because being Latino, being born here, I never really identified with the Latino community in terms of when I went to Venezuela or the first time I went to South America, Cuba right, was that I could identify myself physically with these people but linguistically or culturally I couldn't really adapt or relate to them. Because although my parents were Hispanic they never really grew me up to be Hispanic or to try to accept that identity. The identity that was created for me here was more of Anglo-Saxon identity to essentially

conform to the ideals of society. You know it's, it's a difficult situation for a lot of, especially people from a Latino community that were either born here or grew up here as a youth to really find their own identity, not be criminalized when doing so... I always felt out of place, I never really felt that I was ever really socially accepted within society. Even within, living in marginalized community, you know people within my community. I still felt that, even though we all live in the hood and what not, and the majority of people are Hispanic or Peruvian or some type of visible minority, you know you feel constrained to just that area, right so when you step out of that area or when you step out of the hood you can really feel the difference in dynamics of how your identity shifts. Right, whereas now, you know in the hood, everybody is pretty much the same, you know the same level, doing the same thing, and now when you step out of that box how you are being the target so it's like I mentioned before, you are already criminalized without even having any criminal intent. If I want to walk Forest Hill just to go on a stroll and look at the big houses, I'm going to get stopped and questioned whereas if I'm some white guy walking my dog in sandals and shorts I'm getting a wave and smile and a handshake.

Nevertheless, the effects of unacculturated individuals should not be thought of as the universal indicator as to why youth take on the gang member identity. Rather, taking on any identity is subjective to the individual's experiences and requires "a complex process wherein youth act and react to situations and contexts based on their perception and understanding of their marginalized position in the social order" (Miller et al., 2011, p. 348). That being noted, in the cases of the participants involved in this research, the effects of low acculturation were a strong indicator for the onset of performing the gang member role. A sense of powerlessness and marginalization from the dominant culture essentially bred the feeling of existing apart from society as they discarded the thought of conforming to a culture they felt rejected them. The attempts made by the parents to try to accommodate to the demands of the new Canadian culture set the stage for a lack of parental supervision. This made it possible for the participants to begin to socialize with other members of their community whom maintained similar attitudes and feelings of social distance. In the efforts to attain a sense of belonging as well as to rebel against the conventional culture from which they felt barred, these youth found others with whom to group together in order to achieve this.

The importance of the lack of acculturation for immigrant and first generation peoples from the perspective of Symbolic Interactionism rests in the setting or environment

that presents itself to the individual. The setting, as Goffman (1956) explains is the “physical layout, and other background items which supply the scenery and stage props for the spate of human action played out before, within, or upon it” (Goffman, 1956, p. 13). The individual interacts with his environment and the people or *props* that exist within it. On this stage, the individual is required to act out a role that coincides with the generalized expectations of the community (Becker, 1960). The performance of such roles are learned through socialization and informed by the individual’s reference groups, which as has been noted previously can be either real or fictional characters. As the participants in this study acknowledged, the family unit and the dominant society had become a weak source of reference, whereupon older males in the setting of their neighbourhoods and particular characters from movies and music became their main reference groups to influence their actions.

Goffman (1956) indicates that initially the *Front* or role that the individual plays is used principally for the purpose of creating an impression of reality such that one’s audience will believe, but that it may not be entirely believed by the actor himself. Yet, the more the individual is confronted with contexts in which he must perform the same act and the more that his audience responds to this act by giving positive feedback, the more the act becomes internalized, normalized, and acted upon at a more unconscious level, this is the cycle of *disbelief-to-belief* (Goffman, 1956, p. 12). The identity begins to implement itself in the individual’s understanding of his core-self as the impression of reality he has created becomes the lived reality (Goffman, 1956). How this reality is maintained is the topic of the next portion of this discussion.

6.5 Commitment

The concept of commitment and consistency of action can be traced back to Becker (1960). Becker (1960) highlights the act of placing side bets, the profits of which, if greater than those earned from one’s consistent modes of action, can alter one’s behaviour. He goes on to mention that these side bets are not always consciously made and can be contextualized for the individual based on the situations or environments that one is continuously confronting at any specific moment. He notes that there are “situations where a

person finds that his involvement in social organization has, in effect, made side bets for him and thus constrained his future activity” (Becker, 1960, p. 36).

We can therefore come to understand the concept of side bets as other roles available to the individual in a variety of specific situations, which if acted upon can change one’s course of action. In this respect Becker (1960) tells us that “the notion of consistent lines of activity seems to imply a rejection by the actor of feasible alternatives. He sees several alternative courses open to him, each having something to commend it, but chooses one which best serves his purposes” (Becker, 1960, p. 33). The potential cause for an individual to reject an alternative course can be derived from the potential punishment that may have to be endured for inconsistent actions. This is to say that the actor remains consistent because the consequences of inconsistency will be so expensive that inconsistency will no longer be feasible. Becker (1960) in the example of deviant people explains that:

Deviance is often explained by a circular process: a person who initially commits a minor infraction is increasingly alienated from normal society, therefore commits increasingly serious infractions, and so on. Alternatively, it is explained as the result of a process of differential association : the deviant has associated more with people who think his deviant act is proper than he has with those of the majority which thinks it is wrong (p. 34).

The association with people who believe the individual’s act as proper is, as abovementioned, the individual’s primary reference group, the approval of which is weighted heavily upon as it is also the source from where the generalized cultural expectations are developed. Any actions then that are deemed inconsistent with such expectations may be subjected to a form of penalty, including defamation of the gang member identity which has become the core of one’s self-concept.

Throughout the interviews with the participants it became apparent that a significant aspect of being a gang member was to build and maintain a reputation. Not only did they feel as though they had to represent the gang’s name or the area they were from, but more importantly their individual nick-name which, the more it was known by others, the more one held a certain level of credibility. Alexis demonstrates this when he stated:

“repping” where you were from, I had to put “QP” on the map now, cause now I’m here from “Rex”, we’re from “Rex” “QP”. That ain’t shit, duke it out, washroom up. That’s a problem, like I had to defend mine now. So now I put “QP” on the map. Everybody heard of “QP”. If you ever go to “QP”

right now its legendary in there. It's a legend. Its famous or whatnot, I'm a legend.

Similarly, Ernesto expanded on the importance of having an identity and a name to represent it by saying:

I think that's one of the key elements is having your name. Because your name is your identity. Because when you get incarcerated the first thing they are doing is looking for your gang name because obviously that's a way that you're being identified on the streets. So now when people know your street name or hear your street name they are going to think twice. Because first they are going to identify you with that crew or that gang so now they are going to be like alright well, like I said they are going to have to think twice before they fuck with you. Because they know that now, cause "X" is you know inside or outside and he's a blood or a crip or whatever the case may be. You have some type of power within the street culture but I mean my whole point is that the name itself is how you definitely how you create your own personal identity.

Having a reputation which strengthened one's identity is important to the aspect of commitment, but it was found that the manner in which they attained and maintained their reputations was of even more significance. Herein lays the importance of "work". It should first be noted that although the participants referred to some of their illegal activities as work, this discussion does not share the perspective that the participants were partaking in criminal careers, (Ulmer & Spencer, 1999). Instead, the notion of work herein implies an extension of a performance that adheres to the specific generalized expectations of the environment, "a ceremony-as an expressive rejuvenation and reaffirmation of the moral values of the community" (Goffman, 1956, p. 23), within which they consistently interact. For instance, when asked about his work, Ernesto stated:

I was submersed in it 24 hours, 7 days a week so you don't really have time to think, you know because you're just serving fiends 24/7, you know what I mean? Once your phone rings, you're serving them at the feet, you know so that's pretty much how I maintained the lifestyle. You know, just selling dope non-stop.

'Working', in the commitment stage of the trajectory of gang membership became the primary focus of the participants. Having money was symbolic with having an elevated level of status and being able to buy material objects on a whim and the ability to party 'like a rock star' also became synonymous with success. Goffman (1956) highlights that in most societies, especially North American societies,

there seems to be a major or general system of stratification, and in most stratified societies there is an idealization of the higher strata and some aspiration on the part of those in low places to move to higher ones...[whereby] the most important piece of sign equipment associated with social class consists of the status symbol through which material wealth is expressed (Goffman, 1956, pp. 23 – 24).

When each participant was asked what their peak moment was, or the climactic point in their trajectory, all responded in one way or another to the effect of having a lot of money. Money and the objects that could be purchased became the symbols that helped to sustain consistency in their performance towards their peers and others. Yet, it was the acts involved in the work that generated the symbols of success defining their identity that they had to commit to and which had to remain consistent and continuously be performed in order to be maintained. In this sense, ‘work’ similar to the gun in Stretesky and Pogrebin’s (2007) study became the symbol of their status.

Gangs socialize its members to internalize particular modes of conduct which help the individual to attain certain levels of self-esteem, respect, importance and ultimately an identity. The ceremony that is ‘work’ becomes a means by which to attain status and to gain a reputation (Stretesky & Pogrebin, 2007). In addition to this, since one’s identity is strongly informed by the group and the environment within which he operates and adheres to, the developed norms of that particular group and the actions appropriated in relation to that group’s standards becomes not only a source of pride (Shibutani, 1961 as cited in Stretesky & Pogrebin, 2007, p. 89) but also a necessity, to ward off any potential threats towards one’s identity by not displaying commitment towards the role expectations. This idea of having to protect oneself from potential threats to one’s identity is clearly noted when Claudio stated that:

People change and having said that, there is a lot of gang members that I once called brothers or brother but yet I still had to put an eye out for them or an eye out just to make sure that they don’t go behind my back.

The stage of commitment can then be expressed through the ceremony of ‘work’. The internalized need to work was a means by which one socialized and conformed to the general expectations of the environment as well as to how the identity was built. Commitment to the gang member identity allowed for the individual to refute other roles presented, as any action inconsistent with the norms of the group could be susceptible to

repercussions in the form of attacks to one's identity. The symbols of success further projected to others their commitment to the group, while the means by which they attained these symbols were the form in which the identity was maintained and protected.

The notion of commitment to one's group and the role expectations that had to be performed by each individual can be compared as well to the individual's sense of loyalty held for the group. Each participant in unique fashions referred to a level of loyalty that has to be held amongst the members of the gang. In regards to the trajectory of the identity of gang membership, loyalty and disloyalty was more strongly pronounced in arriving to the process of desistance.

6.6 *Desistance*

Essentially, the process of desistance from the gang member identity was noted to be arrived to through a conscious realization of no longer feeling committed to the group. If looking back to Becker's (1960) concept of side bets referred to above, losing commitment to an identity can be the cause of other identities offering better profits and opportunities than the identity currently consuming the understanding of the core-self. Similarly, disintegration with an identity can also arise from two held identities as coming into conflict with each other. This is to say that the individual's *I* and the *Me* become entangled in debate as to the appropriate mode of action for the situation. Regardless of whether desistance is due to an eventual lack of commitment to a specific role or arises due to a conflict of identities that are looking to maintain saliency within the individual's core understanding of Self, the important element to understand is that desistance is a result of an opportunity for the individual to make a change of character.

Before we continue on with the concept of desistance, it is first important to note that the term herein will not be considering a level of desistance in offending. It is not the focus of this research to measure whether the individual has passed through a process of offending to non-offending. This research remains clear on the notion that desistance from a gang member identity does not imply a desistance from all other deviant or otherwise criminally labeled identities. Furthermore, and as will become more clear, desistance should also be understood as a process within itself. It should not be understood to represent a point of cessation or any sort of finality. Unfortunately, as is mentioned by Bushway, Thornberry and

Krohn (2003), out of the three processes studied in the field of criminal careers, desistance is the least ventured, and it is my opinion that the notion of desistance from identities is even less popular. Furthermore, to borrow from Sutterluty (2007) “the developmental stages through which young violent criminals pass cannot be grasped using a ‘career’ concept that presumes set opportunities and structures within which they methodically and strategically move forward” (p. 268). This is to say that the participants and those that they represent are not partaking in criminal careers but working towards the continuous establishment and re-establishment of identities. That being said, although this portion of the discussion is highly informed by studies conducted on criminal careers and the life course, particular elements of those studies remain pertinent towards the concept of desistance and identities.

Mulvey et al. (2004) maintain the position that desistance from antisocial behaviour is positively linked to the developmental changes that occur in people’s lives, they note that “developmental change in late adolescence and early adulthood facilitates the acquisition or refinement of competencies and values that make criminal behaviour less attractive or less acceptable” (p. 217) essentially attributing change through maturation. There did not seem to be too much evidence to support this in the cases of the participants of this study, but one element that the authors noted that was apparent in the participant’s narratives is that change and retrospective reconstruction is best affected by how one comes to see oneself (Mulvey et al., 2004).

The desistance from the gang identity herein was most attributed to identified events that promoted internal reorientation to consider alternative identities, these are what this paper has come to consider as *Turning Points* which were discussed previously. Important to the notion of desistance from a deviant identity as presented by the participants is the perceptions of loyalty and disloyalty that was felt amongst the participants and their peers.

The participants identified that part of being in a gang was being loyal to the group and resting assured that the other members of the group would also be loyal in return. Three out of four participants spent some time incarcerated whereby they remembered feeling as though the loyalty that they held for the group was not being reciprocated. When Ernesto speaks about being incarcerated he stated the following:

Right so, I ended up just getting locked down consecutively, you know, doing a few months here, doing a few months there, going to court, you know going through all of this bullshit and um, eventually you know one of my friends

basically made me stay inside for a minute, he could have bailed me out right away but he was like yo, you know you've got to learn a lesson because you keep on getting locked down. You know you think people that got your back, you know, they ain't got your back, they don't even put a dollar in your canteen. Meanwhile you're putting thousands of dollars in their pocket, right so, that was my self-realization. When I got locked down...

After realizing that those who he felt should have been there for him were not, he began to re-assess his identity. It could be said then that there seemed to be an inconsistency with the expectations that had been built and imbedded into the individual, the individual began to assess his own commitment to the identity, initiating its breaking away from the understanding of the core self. The event that sparked this self-realization was the incarceration that fostered the stage to realize that the gang was not as deeply rooted as it had once seemed. Jail for this and one other participant provided the circumstances to see the perils associated with their gang identity as well as setting the stage of solitude that they initially sought to escape by joining the gang. Feeling once again alone they were forced to formulate different reference groups to inform a new identity that gauged their actions.

The assembly of new reference groups occurs in the same manner that the initial reference groups were built, through socialization. All of the participants in this study managed to extract themselves or be 'knifed off' (Maruna & Roy, 2007) from their previous peers and environments. This process is not one that occurs immediately which enhances the idea that desistance is something that occurs over a period of time. This can be evidenced Claudio spoke out in regards to his attempts to stop dealing drugs:

The truth is that I didn't look for them, they were looking for me to participate and keep doing the drug movements because obviously it was benefiting them because a share would go to them. So they wanted me to keep pushing it because I was the one that pushed the most and they would literally drop bags of drugs for me to do it and I would be like no I don't want it, take it, I'm trying to leave it and they just kept instigating me to do it and I look at a time of need and I was like ok, you know I have a son I need some money, it wouldn't be a bad thing right now. So I would go and do it again and fall back into it. So ya it was always this, back and forth, back and forth struggle.

Once the individuals managed to actively change their environments, they began to participate and interact with different settings of socialization and eventually 'cut off' those who they felt would hinder their desistance from their previous identity. It is interesting to note as well that each participant sought to participate in the environment offered by youth

social service programs. Each participant began mentoring youth to become the positive role model they once lacked to steer children away from gangs. To this effect, Laub and Sampson (2001) highlight that part of the process of desistance is accepting roles that are more conducive to the expectations of the dominant society, this is to say that once the participants managed to change their environments they took on roles that were more socially accepted, not only that of youth mentor but also those of father, student and employee.

As has been repeated, desistance is not a point of finality. Although each participant admitted to no longer identifying with the gang member identity, or that it no longer defines their understanding of their core-self, this does not mean to say that the identity or the possibility to revert back to that identity depending on the circumstances and situations has stopped. The gang member identity has not reached a level of non-existence but has instead reached a state of dormancy. For instance, when Alexis was asked on what he thought his “G” status is now, he responded by saying “1 to 10? Between 3 and 4, 3.5, 4... Because I just, it’s always there, it’s always going to be in the back of my head, always.”

Similarly Claudio noted:

For me it’s funny in my line of work with management, I catch myself doing things that I probably would have done before, not in a bad sense but as a manager obviously there is sales involved and you push sales as much as you can and you see yourself hustling. I caught myself so many times saying things that I would say to other people when I was hustling drugs, it’s like holy shit, nothing has really changed, like I’m still that same person but obviously you do it for different reasons.

Because our environments are continuously changing and the situations that we confront often require of us to assume different roles, we cannot assume the desistance from an identity to be synonymous with its termination. An identity may be extracted from the core-self but may still be called upon depending on the circumstances confronted in the present moment. The memories of these behaviours remain in the individual and act as references to direct actions as required by the social context but is done requiring more thought and on a more conscious level as such action are no longer as habitual.

The concept of identities is as complex as the formation of identities themselves. An individual must act out a variety of roles throughout the day in order to adhere to the circumstantial contexts that the present moment offers. There exists an abundance of symbols and channels of information that we are provided with through socialization that

help to decorate the masks that we wear and direct the actions of the roles we fulfill. Every new situation is an opportunity requiring the re-adjustment of our ever changing schemas and identities. Saliency of a particular identity can come to create a specific reality for an individual, but can be disoriented at any given moment throughout the constant stream of action. When a particular mask is no longer conducive to the managing of one's impressions, it is put to sleep and becomes dormant, but with the potential to be awoken at any unexpected moment.

Chapter 7 –*Ride until the casket drops*: Conclusion

What has been most clear is that understanding gangs is not an easy feat. It can often be confounded by its evolutionary nature, its glorified representation and even by the labeling process used to classify what a gang is. What has been observed throughout is that gang membership is a subjective experience unique to those individuals who narrate this particular identity. It is believed then that to better approach the understanding of gangs as a whole, we must take into better consideration the experiences of those who directly give the gang member reality its meaning. Herein, this paper has borrowed certain concepts to build a template from which to work from as to not appear to be searching into some sort of object of mythical existence. In order to navigate through the social complexities which have come to give the concept of gang meaning, this research was focused on exploring the experiences of those individuals who self-identified as having participated within that domain and essentially aided in doing so. By looking into the identity of being a gang member, this research has been able to observe the phenomenon at a proximate distance while also trying to understand how the constructed reality of the gang can affect one's perception of self.

As was evidenced by the narratives, a street gang is first and foremost an outlet (one of many), that can offer individuals a sense of belonging and opportunities for recognizance. It is a social hub where people can learn to build character during the process of their self-development. Additionally, the street gang is a subculture whose members interact and formulate particular norms, values as well as rituals and ceremonies. Adherence to these demonstrates one's commitment to the group and with repetition, solidifies one's self-identification as a gang member. *Working*, or otherwise earning money becomes an important aspect of the gang member's identity, not as a career, but for the accumulation of material wealth as symbols of their status and identity. The individual must continuously work as a means to comply with the rituals associated to the role that has become internalized, for inconsistency in action to these roles may become detrimental to the identity that is being upheld.

As is noted by the Symbolic Interactionist perspective, identities are not stagnant self-meanings. People act distinctly depending on how they perceive and come to define

their immediate surroundings and circumstances, but a particular identity can maintain a position of saliency, which tends to direct the individual's actions in most scenarios. Needless to say, the development of identities is an ongoing process and the salient position can be occupied and overthrown at various points in time throughout one's life course. This research believes that fluid movement of identities can be highlighted through the occurrence of *Turning Points*. Turning points are specific moments, or an accumulation thereof which cause a disturbance in the saliency of an identity - events that trigger an internal conflict between identities. The internal conflicts, or otherwise understood as internal conversations (Charon, 2010), happen between the *I* and the *Me* to decide upon the most appropriate action in consideration of the present social circumstances. The more often a new identity informs the individual's course of action, the more it becomes internalized and the former salient identity begins to lose its strong hold. Nevertheless, it was brought to light through the narratives that the desistance from an identity, or otherwise the process of its loss of saliency within the individual, does not represent this specific identity's fatality. Instead, the continuation of the desistance from an identity can place it into what this paper has come to term as a state of *Dormancy*. The identity does not totally disappear, but remains mostly inactive and filed in the mental schemas as part of the individual's abundant *Reference Group* folders.

After assessing the participant's narratives, it became clear that the reality imposed onto "gangs" rests solely in the individual's subjective experiences of them. This is to say that there cannot be an all-encompassing, universal meaning applied to the term since not only does every individual's experience differ from another's, but perspectives are always subject to change. As much as our state of *Being* is constant, our identities are constantly changing. Simply because we may not personally self-identify as a gang member does not mean to say that we have not or are not capable of playing the role. Our environments and the social groups with which we typically interact are tantamount towards informing the types of roles that we learn to play and the manners in which we come to define our situations. Although we may be the creators of our own realities and give meaning to these realities through the roles we perform, we are not necessarily always in total control of the environments that come to surround us.

The many hurdles faced by Canadian Immigrants and the limitations they confront make the process to acculturate properly to Canadian society extremely difficult, but this alone is not sufficient enough a reason to correlate street gangs to groups of ethnic minorities. Alternatively, what this does expose is the marginalizing social environments that Canadian youth are faced to interact with consistently and the level of susceptibility to gang or sub-cultural group formation that this sensed marginalization promotes. When needing to cope with the feeling of rejection from dominant culture, rebelling against it can be the cause for a sense of pride. We have seen that marginalization seems to be a better indicator for the relationship between race, class and crime than does one's particular genotype makeup or their yearly income.

I am reminded here by a powerful letter that was written by an inmate facing capital punishment in Texas. His letter discussed a personal perspective on the deficiencies of the Criminal Justice System, the Prison Industrial Complex, but the portion most specific to this paper reads;

[Kids] have to be exposed to something new. Their minds have to be challenged, not dulled. [Kids] know the history of the Crips & Bloods, but they can't tell you who Garvey or Robeson is... It's senseless, but they are trying to find a purpose to live for and if a gang gives them a sense of purpose that's what they will gravitate to. They aren't being taught to live and die for something greater. They're not being challenged to do better. (Ray Jasper, http://gawker.com/a-letter-from-ray-jasper-who-is-about-to-be-executed-1536073598/+hamilton_nolan)

Ray Jasper discussed in his letter the effects of the identity crisis faced by young black males in a capitalistic society, whereby making money and getting rich (legally or illegally) seems to have become the manner in which they attain their sense of belonging within greater society. He believes that many young people are becoming less aware of their roots and cultural origins and becoming more fixated on the pursuit of wealth and the almighty dollar (the presumed symbol of happiness) as a replacement for the strong cultural elements that had otherwise historically informed people's identities and sense of selves. Underlying within his comments is not only the importance of the individual's identity management, but also how our identities are being informed. This speedy and technologically advanced era seems to be moving the new generation of youth faster and

faster into a future where all of the footprints from their past are becoming untraceable. This same inmate wrote;

A French woman who moved to America asked me one day, 'Why don't black kids want to learn?' Her husband was a high school teacher. She said the white and asian kids excel in school, but the black and hispanic kids don't. I said that all kids want to learn, it's just a matter of what you're trying to teach them. Cutting a frog open is not helping a black kid in the ghetto who has to listen to police sirens all night and worry about getting shot. Those kids need life lessons. They need direction. When you have black kids learning more about the Boston Tea Party than the Black Panther Party, I guarantee you won't keep their attention. But it was the Black Panther Party that got them free lunch. (Ray Jasper, http://gawker.com/a-letter-from-ray-jasper-who-is-about-to-be-executed-1536073598/+hamilton_nolan)

As a result of youth not being able to identify even with the material that is being taught in the schools, the reference groups that once informed the pillars of the identities of our ancestors are losing substance and instead, are now more often being founded on superficiality. Considering this and the testimonies from the participants of this research, money seems to be the greatest motive and means of becoming incorporated into a society nourished predominantly by immediate gratification and great disposability. If this stands true, then gangs as a money making resource provides an excellent outlet for those who feel marginalized from the dominant culture as a means to establish an identity that will provide them with the desired status and social capital to thrive within their surroundings.

People's environment is a major catalyst in informing the identities that individuals will assume, but this research in no way abides to the notion that we are simply products of our environment. On the other hand, this paper hopes to pronounce the idea that we interact and react to our environments along with the diverse circumstances that arise within them. Considering this, this paper has attempted to bring to light that the gang member identity may be most attractive to those people whose environment breeds a strong sense of marginalization and where opportunities to encounter different environments that promote and encourage more positive lifestyles are few and far between. If indeed the gang member identity is as troubling as it has come to be understood, we must seek the elements that allow for this specific identity to engulf an individual's understanding of self.

This paper has come to understand that existing and engrained systemic deficiencies build the platform for a staged environment that yields individuals from those experiences that better stimulate the ample identity roles that can be performed. Without expanding the horizons of experience, individuals who find themselves confined to a marginalized state of being can only resort to what they know. If society as a whole only arms these individuals with weak reference groups that promote a ‘get rich or die trying’ mentality, then our attempts to improve the gang issue cannot excel far beyond simply identifying the problem. If we wish to further our attempts at understanding the gang, perhaps we should focus more studies towards the exploration of the development and desistance from identities rather than on criminal behaviour alone. Through this method we may possibly take considerable steps closer towards curbing more Canadian youth away from the gang member identity by providing them with different role alternatives to identify with.

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