"For Me, They Were the Good Old Days": Retrospective Narratives of Childhood Experiences in 'the Gang'

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Abstract: Much of the existing scholarship on gang membership predominantly focuses on adolescence as being the formative time period for the development of gang identities; however, there has thus far been more limited attention towards the childhood experiences of gang members, (i.e., pre-adolescence). The organising principle of this paper is to articulate the retrospective accounts of gang members' childhoods, and how these recollections form a central role to the emergence of gang identities. The data presented in this paper were collected during fieldwork in two adult, men's prisons in England; interviews were conducted with 60 active and former prison gang members, identified through prison databases; a small number (n = 9) of interviews were conducted with 'street' participants, such as ex-offenders, outreach workers and gang researchers. This paper aims to show that many gang members romanticise accounts of their childhoods, in spite of often having experienced adverse childhood experiences:, so too do many gang members view their childhood experiences as part of their mythologised narrative of life in 'the gang'. Nevertheless, a tension exists between how gang members seek to portray their childhood experiences around gangs and the negative labelling and strain they experienced during their childhood; often, romanticised accounts seek to retrospectively neutralise these harms. In so doing, the lens through which childhood gang membership is viewed is one which conceptualises childhood gang involvement as being something non-deleterious, thus acting as a lens that attempts to neutralise the harms and vicissitudes of gang affiliation.

Keywords: street gangs; youth gangs; youth violence; childhood

1. Introduction

Recent times have witnessed an increased politicisation of the gang discourse. In particular, a tension exists between criminologists who argue that gangs are a clear, apparent problem in society (see, e.g., Densley 2013; Harding 2014; Maitra 2017) and those who contend that 'gang talk' arises when gang status is too readily ascribed to individuals (see, e.g., Hallsworth and Young 2004, 2008). Although criminologists on both 'sides' draw many of their arguments from active offenders, one of the unintended consequences of this ideological debate is that the voices of gang members themselves have been driven away from the forefront, eclipsed and overshadowed by increasingly fraught debates (This paper aims to bring the voices of gang members to the fore, drawing on their perspectives on the underresearched area of childhood gang membership and how narratives of childhood gang involvement contribute to the wider narrative framework of life in 'the gang'. This paper begins by a review of the literature around contemporary youth gangs, historical youth gangs, Mertonian strain and labelling. It then goes on to outline the methodology and how the data included in this paper were gathered. It then presents the results, including both the qualitative data gathered from gang members as well as their analysis. Finally, this paper ends with its conclusion.

A wealth of research exists as to the development of street gang activity in the United States, documenting their development and long, historical presence within the country. Specifically, in relation to childhood experiences within the gang, the earlier literature identifies how children (i.e., pre-adolescent individuals) were involved within gangs in 1920s America. Thrasher's (1927) seminal study *The Gang* identifies how the children of recent immigrants from Europe joined gangs in 'interstitial' spaces, namely, "spaces that intervene between one things and another" (p. 22). Thrasher conducted his study in Chicago, focusing on these urbanised, economically deprived 'zones' of the city. The underdeveloped welfare provisions of early twentieth-century America, combined with less regard given to rights of the child than in later times, both meant that there were many children from economically deprived backgrounds who joined the city's gangs (Thrasher 1927). Indeed, this phenomenon continued in post-WWII America, with the involvement of both pre-adolescent youths and adolescents in urban street gangs (Yablonsky 1962).

In addition to such literature, there are also theorists who note that there have long been 'moral panics' and 'folk devils' created in relation to the law-breaking activities and practices of adolescents and young people (Cohen [1972] 1989). In particular, there has been a focus on how collectives of young people are often labelled as being 'gangs'. Central to this argument is the long-running 'gang thesis' debate, which sees a bifurcation between those, on the one hand, who scrutinise and document youth gang activity (Pitts 2008; Densley 2013; Maitra 2016b) and those who deny the existence of gangs, labelling them as being social constructs arising from an overeagerness to ascribe gang 'status' to youth collectives (Hallsworth and Young 2004; Hallsworth and Young 2008; Hallsworth and Silverstone 2009). Indeed, "an underlying theme in much of these debates is around the labels ascribed to 'criminal' groups . . . central to these contemporary discussions is the tension which exists between those who contend that gang status is too readily ascribed to individuals, and those who do not" (Maitra 2017, p. 74). Further, what is evident from much of these discussions is the focus placed on youths: either as the subjects of study, or in the argument that a crime-adverse society too readily criminalises behaviours of young people. The overrepresentation of adolescents in gang membership, as well as in the commissions of criminal activities and practices, means that this is a debate that seems set to continue. However, through focusing on the gang activities and practices of children (i.e., under 13 year olds), one can work towards a slightly different conceptualisation of 'the gang'. In particular, the vulnerability of children, and their more limited moral agency can help conceptualise 'the gang' less as a threat and more as the manifestation and 'end point' of social exclusion, deprivation and wider societal harms (see also Maitra 2017). Indeed, it is not a wholly novel approach to viewing different gangs as occupying different spaces on a 'continuum' (ibid.), with gangs composed of younger members (and under the direction and possible coercion of 'elders') holding less moral culpability for their actions than gangs composed of older individuals.

It is perhaps primarily because of the overrepresentation of adolescents in gangs that less attention is paid towards the criminal behaviours of children (as compared to that of adolescents and adults). This observation is true in relation to both gang-related activities as well as wider criminal practices. Specifically, in relation to gang activity in England—the focus of this paper—it is clear that there is a more limited body of scholarship on English youth gangs, as compared to their American counterparts. Nevertheless, there is still research into both gangs in Victorian England and, more recently, gangs in the late twentieth century. Similar to Thrasher's (1927) study, referred to earlier, the existing research on pre-WWII gangs in England shows a great presence of children within gang structures. The Scuttlers are one of the first identified youth gangs within England (see Davies 2009). As Maitra (2017, p. 11) writes:

> *The Scuttlers were collectives of working-class Mancunian youths who engaged in inter-group violence, primarily between 1870 and the late 1890s (Davies 1998). The Scuttlers based their activities around protecting territory, identifying themselves with specific regions of Greater Manchester, and engaging in street fights which often involved knives and blades, as well as hand-to-hand combat (ibid.)*

It is apparent that the limited lack of welfare provisions for children in Victorian England left a gap which gangs could fill. More recently, the gradual erosion of the welfare state in the United States

and England (Jones 2012) has led to many of the arguments of old arising again: for example, that gangs are able to act in loco parentis, provide sustenance, ontological security and practical/material benefits for young people. Indeed, if one studies the established body of criminological scholarship, it is clear that—somewhat counterintuitively—the focus was on *youth* (viz. adolescent) gang members throughout much of the late twentieth/early twenty-first century (see, e.g., Alexander 2000; Pitts 2008). Somewhat counterintuitively, it is only more recently that the focus has shifted from exclusively looking at youth gang members to child gang members, primarily due to the rise of 'county lines' and the growing recognition of the inherently exploitative relationship of gang membership. The new, twenty-first-century gang paradigm moves away from the previous typology of gang 'elders' and 'youngers' (see Pitts 2008), whereby gangs were characterised as being a pseudo-family, often gang members themselves. Rather, the (relatively) new phenomenon of 'county lines', where children may be exploited into carrying drugs into new territories (effectively a form of child trafficking), sees the relationship between younger and older gang members being framed in different terms. In this new gang 'paradigm', rather than child gang members being seen as 'youngers', they are viewed by government agencies, academics and practitioners as, first and foremost, children who are being exploited by gang members. This is a nuanced, but important distinction to make. Throughout the literature, then, a contrast should be drawn between youth (adolescent) gang members, who are usually defined as being between the ages of 13 and 19, and child gang members, who are usually defined as being below the age of 13. This distinction is not always made clearly, and some studies use the terms interchangeably. Indeed, one can argue that the most recent research around county lines conceptualises vulnerability and risk in different terms to past policy pronouncements, namely, that children who are conducting risky and (in some cases) illegal activities are first and foremost the victims (see also Harding 2020). This new conceptualisation of victimisation posits that children and adolescents can simultaneously be engaged in law-breaking practices whilst also being the victims of manipulation, 'grooming' and coercion. The fact that some of the individuals who fall into this category are above the criminal age of responsibility in England and Wales (10 years old) illustrates a more nuanced, and arguably more progressive lens through which the gang activities of children are viewed. Further, in recent times, it can be argued that young people are facing 'strains', both economic and ontological, at an earlier age. Accordingly, it is unsurprising that the age of gang members continues to decrease.

Returning to the broader subject of youth gang activities, most recently, an emerging literature exists on the use of the internet and underground rap videos as a means of creating gang identities—part of which includes 'gang myth-making' (Lauger and Densley 2018), which refers to the construction of gang identities online which may not always reflect their real-life iterations. Intrinsic to these discussions are the presence and activities of young people (and increasingly, children) who feature prominently both in contemporary gangs and their expressive activities online (Storrod and Densley 2017)[1]. However, much of this literature focuses on the online recordings of contemporary street gangs, for whom the articulation of a 'violence script', including recording and exaggeration their capacities for violence (Irwin-Rogers et al. 2018), serves both symbolic and practical functions. Such individuals may be found to be forthcoming with the names of gang members and gangs, focusing on both the realities and vicissitudes of their past gang involvement as well as engaging in mythmaking to bolster their reputations and harness their position on the streets. Although the results of this paper focus on jailed gang members' accounts—and thus, online activities fall outside its scope—it is important to bear in mind the increasing relevance of online representation of gang activity as a form of 'internet banging' (Irwin-Rogers 2019; Irwin-Rogers et al. 2018); young people are also disproportionately represented in such online representations.

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[1]   Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that there has been an increase in the number of young adolescents involved in gang activity within England, something reflected by gang homicide rates in major English cities.

Returning to the topic of street gang member, there is an expansive literature on the particular issue of youth gang members, and their activities and practices. Whilst most of this literature stems from the United States (e.g., Hagedorn 1998; Rios 2011), there has been a growth in the literature focused on youth gang membership within the United Kingdom (e.g., Densley 2013; Harding 2014; Maitra 2016a). Much of this can be attributed to the growing phenomenon of gangs within the United Kingdom, where there has been a large increase in youth gang membership and gang-related violence (Maitra 2017), including a concentration of shootings, homicides and serious violence, often concentrated in metropolitan cities such as London (Densley 2013). There has, furthermore, been an increased presence of younger gang members within the activities of such gangs, whether in relation to pecuniary activities or the commission of violence (Harding 2014), as well as victimisation within the gang (Andell and Pitts 2017). Indeed, the vernacular of gang members reflects this, with the presence of specific terms such as 'youngers' to denote those young adolescents or children who partake in gang activity (Densley 2013).

2. Materials and Methods

The data presented in this thesis were collected as part of a three-year ESRC-funded study into gangs in the North of England. The bulk of the research was conducted in two adult men's prisons in the region. Twenty-five prisoners were interviewed at the first prison ("Prison A"), and thirty-five prisoners were interviewed at the second prison ("Prison B"). Therefore, a total of sixty prisoners were interviewed as part of this research. The majority of prisoners who participated in this research were gang members[2], selected through purposive sampling: in Prison A, twenty of the prisoners interviewed were gang members, and at Prison B, thirty of the prisoners interviewed were gang members. Thereafter, I used opportunity sampling to select non-gang members at both Prison A (n = 5) and Prison B (n = 5). Although most prisoners were interviewed once (n = 55), some were interviewed on multiple occasions (n = 5). Through conducting this fieldwork, I was able to develop rapport, and this facilitated the discussion of more sensitive topics, including around childhood experiences, family matters and traumatic incidents. Permission was sought from the National Research Council (NRC) and Prison Governors to bring in a Dictaphone into prisons, which was used to record interviews in jail. During this stage of the research, all participants consented to having their interviews recorded, although several repeatedly sought re-assurances of anonymity Although this paper focuses on the childhood experiences of gang members, it should be noted that none of the participants were children (i.e., they were all over the age of 18). This may appear somewhat counterintuitive; however, the research was conducted in adult prisons due to reasons of ethics and feasibility. First, from informal communications with the National Research Council (NRC) and HM Prisons and Probation, it became clear that research could not be undertaken with children in custody without great difficulty in gaining ethical approval. Further, even if such clearance was gained, an appropriate adult would have to be present during interviews; this could affect rapport, and raised further issues around confidentiality. For all these reasons, only adult prisons were chosen as research sites. This poses one obvious limitation around issues of memory and recalling of events, and this should be borne in mind when reading the results. Nevertheless, conversely, one benefit is that as participants are delivering retrospective accounts, they are able to better contextualise their childhood experiences, placing them within their wider life experiences.

I also conducted a limited amount of fieldworks on the streets of the North of England. This included interviews with reformed offenders (n = 2), gang researchers (n = 3), youth workers (n = 4), community residents (n = 2) and police officers (n = 2). For the purposes of this paper, however, I primarily present results from gang members, in addition to responses from one gang researcher. I

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2   For the purposes of sampling, a prisoner was classified as a 'gang member' if he appeared on the prison records as a gang member and self-identified as such.

used a Dictaphone for most elements of the 'street' research, barring a few instances where participants did not want interviews to be recorded, or it was not practicable.

After collection, the data were fully, manually transcribed and manually coded, after which I adopted an analytical 'bottom–up' approach, allowing for key themes to emerge from the data sets, and sorted the data into key/core themes for the stage of data analysis; no computer software or computer coding was used in the analytical stage of the research. For the purposes of anonymity, prisoners are referred to by pseudonyms; the sample sites are referred to as Prison A and Prison B. However, 'gang statuses' are referred to throughout (i.e., whether the prisoner was a gang member or not a gang member). For the participant who was not a prisoner, again, he is referred to by a pseudonym and his role (Gang Researcher). Within the transcripts themselves, questions asked by me (the interviewer) appear in bold, whereas the remainder of the text is the respondent's answer.

3. Results

The results, as presented in the following section of this chapter, are sorted according to the 'key themes' that emerged when the transcribed data were analysed. Relevant to the overarching topic of this paper, all of the themes, as presented in this section, are related to childhood experiences in 'the gang'. Below, I present the three key themes to emerge from analysis of the data: the retrospective accounts they delivered of their childhoods, and its relevance to involvement in gang activity; gang members' opinions on labelling; and their recollections of growing up on (council) housing estates.

3.1. Retrospective Accounts of Childhood as Central to 'the Gang'

As has previously been stated, this paper primarily focuses on childhood (i.e., before adolescence), and although there were instances of overlap between discussions on participants' childhoods and adolescent years, many gang members specifically delivered accounts of their childhoods and how their experiences as children were formative in the creation of their gang identities:

> For me, it was kinda born and bred. Cos we had all the local gangsters in and out me mum's house. Me two sisters are a lot older so when I was like a young boy they were like 16, 17, and they were going round all the major heads from round [area]. And cos of me mum being a brass [sex-worker] they were forever in and out of the house. But I'm coming up with a mum who's done jail for robbery and armed robbery; and dad whose done jail for a mac-10. So, when I look back to my childhood, your kind of in it from young. **Bradley, Gang Member, Prison A**

> When I was 11, 12 venturing outside me home, that was when it was all starting, taking off, so . . . I remember going down [name of road], and they [gang members] all used to sit on outside one house . . . from where they used to sell all their crack. And I remember being a kid . . . they used to have, like, all the best cars, all the best clothes, but even from them times, they used to look to after us. Cos we were the future. And they used to have the baseball bats and the dogs, and we'd play with the dogs and as kids we'd run over to them, and as kids they'd look after us, give money; they were G-ing you up to take over from them one day. For me they were the good old days. When I look back, I look back fondly, and don't realise that that all shaped my life. I look back and think it was good, it was nice. **David, Gang Member, Prison B**

Although neither Bradley nor David were 'hardcore' gang members—instead describing themselves as being on the periphery of gang membership—(see Maitra 2017), they still delivered highly romanticised accounts of what it meant to be in 'the gang', and to have grown up around gang members. There were other participants, however, who delivered more pragmatic accounts of their childhood experiences around gangs:

> I didn't have a bad childhood. Yes, there was violence between me parents because they was alcoholics. But from a young age I knew I would be an armed robber. Though it was a rough

area, mine wasn't a criminal family. Like, me sister has never broken a single law. Just works 9-5. But I knew this would be my end career from when I was a kid, I just didn't know that I would reach such heights in the field [of armed robbery]. **Harry, Gang Member, Prison A**

There were additional data collected in relation to the childhood experiences of gang members. For example, Jimmy, a self-declared 'hard-core' gang member, delivered one of the starkest accounts of childhood involvement in gang activity. He recounted his first interaction with a firearm as being central to his subsequent gang affiliation and involvement in serious criminality:

> I first held a gun when I was about 12 years old. It was an older guy's gun. Didn't do nothing with it, like, didn't shoot no one or anything like that. But it was a mad feelin. A feeling of power, know what I'm sayin? Just holding it. Even without the bullets in. Just a mad feelin' of power. And quite enjoyed the feelin' and wanted to feel more of it. So, when I got to about 15, 16, I always kept a gun around. Buried somewhere. Just so I know that if I needed it I could get it. If any of the older lads picked on me, that'd be my way of solving the problem. Cos I couldn't go toe-to-toe with them cos they're a lot bigger and older. So, in my mind I thought, "If I do keep a gun buried, problem solved". Caused more problems, like put me in prison, but it solved a problem with the bullies. **Jim, Gang Member, Prison B**

It is important to note, then, that despite some 'romanticised' retrospective accounts, there were others who delivered accounts that differed in their tone and how they presented the realities of life as a gang member. It is important to note that not all such accounts were of one's personal experiences, but also included what individuals remembered about the childhoods of their peers and associates:

> I've got a friend, and he was 8 years old selling crack on the street cos him mum was a brass [sex worker]. And rather than mam having to go and sell herself on the street, he'd graft his arse off, not to buy trainers and all these nice things everyone else wanted, but he wanted to put money in his mum's pocket food in the fridge so she didn't have to go on the streets and sell herself. **Bradley, Gang Member, Prison A**

Indeed, it was not just gang members who delivered the harsh realities of gang members' childhood experiences. Gang researchers, too, were able to articulate the troubles faced by gang members during childhood. Whilst the physical privations were not as acute for children in the U.K as compared to developing countries, there were still a number of issues to be contended, whereby 'ironic role models' came to one's rescue:

> For some of these kids, and we are talking about kids … **What ages?** Under 15 … gang leaders present as 'ironic rode models' to them. They ask: what will they gain? What will the gang provide for them? Cos the appeal to higher loyalties is very prominent. And it's also protection. So, it's sort of like saying the gang gives you sustenance; it'll give you your income, it'll give you your father and mother; it'll give you your brothers, your sisters. It will give you a family. And you will also have a form of sustenance in terms of day to day shelter, food, clothing. Because the gang is providing that in a classic sense. In the U.K. it's slightly different, but the appeal to higher loyalties is still there. **Bilal, Gang Researcher**

Developing this theme of sustenance—and the gang providing members with an 'income'—Ryan delivered the following account of how he entered into gang activity:

> **And when did your involvement in crime start?** I was in school, doing alright, in top sets and everything. But I think it was about 12 or 13, and me older brother was involved in that type of stuff. And I seen him coming home with like wads of money, and all the time used to go out. And obviously I was just a kid, so admiring the lifestyle he was living, all the clothes … he gave me money all the time. And once I had a little taste of it, I wanted it meself. That's what it was like. And me brother, and his group of mates—which the Police

would see as another organised crime gang—they was going out, out to all these clubs, they had all the top clothes, and they had a nice life from what I seen. So I wanted to get involved.
Ryan, Gang Member, Prison B

For some participants, whether gang members or non-gang members, it was noted that the age of 'onset' into gang activity was arguably younger than much of the existing literature from the late twentieth century would suggest. Bill (below) again referred to gang affiliation starting when he and his peers were "kids", going on to identify his interaction with New Labour's Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs), which were 'marketed' as being a bulwark against youth offending:

> **And did you have names?** When we was kids, one of me mates thought it'd be funny to spray-paint on the bridge [gang name]. And they called it [gang name]. One of the estates in [area] is called [name]. So, the police picked up on it, and started using it against us. Everyone got ASBOs. To us it was just a laugh. He sprayed [initials] on a bridge and on a stolen motorbike. He sprayed it on a bridge that was on our estate. To him it was just a laugh. We never saw it as nothing. **Bill, Gang Member, Prison B**

As Bill's response illustrates, much of these events occurred whilst participants were children growing up in council estates; these locales were both the setting of early gang formations, activities and practices and also spaces where residents felt they were unfairly and disproportionately labelled as criminals and engaging in delinquent behaviour.

3.2. Labelling and Deprived Locales

Many participants referred to their earliest childhood experiences—as "babies"—as having taken place on their housing estates. Accordingly, these estates were spaces which formed the backdrop to one's gang affiliation and subsequent gang activities:

> **And for your group, how did you select who was a part?** all moved onto just one estate when we was all babies. There was loads of us. We all grew up on the one estate. There was a few of us. We're all good mates. Obviously, we've got work mates, mates that do other things. Legit. But we're just all mates. **Michael, Gang Member, Prison B**

Michael was one of several participants who referred to life on the 'estate' as central to gang identity, acting as a practical setting and lynchpin for future affiliation. David (below) offered a similar account, both of the centrality of growing up "on the same estate" as fellow gang members and also in describing how interestate rivalries developed and formed one component of the area-based violence that was axiomatic to much gang activity:

> **And what does the term gang mean to you?** A group of guys that have grown up on the same estate, and back each other all the way. If that's the case, then I've got a gang of three or four mates that I trust with me life, and they trust me with their lives. Because we've grown up together and we're loyal. My gang formed around the estate I was from. We used to fight with rival estates, schools from rival estates. **David, Gang Member, Prison B**

Prison gang members[3] interviewed for this research were invariably and disproportionately from such deprived locales. These spaces were characterised as chaotic, deprived and lacking in financial and social capital. Accordingly, they facilitated the development of gangs, which, in turn, progressed from childhood through to adolescence:

> **And your experiences of gangs?** Yeh. I used to get about with a street gang where I grew up, when I was young. I dunno what attracted me to it now, in hindsight, but obviously

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[3]　'Prison gang members' refers to individuals who were gang members prior to their imprisonment *and* who (thereafter) were classified as gang members by their prisons.

just it was like being bad was the cool thing. Just doing bad things I guess, you know? **And what age did it start?** About 11 or 12. To begin with it was truanting from school, meeting up with mates that were from the same estate . . . started experimenting with cigarettes, then cannabis. Then to have money, started committing crime. I started doing dwelling burglaries at that age . . . where we are in [name of area], there's poverty and wealth side by side. Then at the age of 14, ermmm, I stopped burgling and I progressed to street robberies for Rolex and Cartier Watches. Start snatching watches at 13 or 14. **Bill, Gang Member, Prison B**

How openly did gangs operate where you grew up? I'm from [area], me. It starts off from car-crime, thieving, estate where you come from. I come from one a rough estate, one of the roughest estates in [area]. So, it's a bit deprived where I'm from; so it's always been hard. **Jonny, Gang Member, Prison B**

Bill's and Jonny's experiences focused less around negative labelling applied to them and more around their formative behaviours of life in 'the gang' being intertwined with material deprivations. For other participants, however, being born in an estate was the sine qua non of subsequent labelling and discriminatory harassment by public authorities and institutions:

Where I grew up, a gang is a group of . . . mates going to the park together, to the shops together. Or it could be someone [involved] in criminal activities, different sides, different estates; gangs have been like that for years. Where I grew up, you were set up to fail: you're a part of the estate, getting shot at, and I got dragged into it. When they talk about gangs, if I'm with a group of six or seven in a place, it's a 'gang' to them . . . **I:** You mean to the police? The authorities? **P:** Yeh. But it could be that we're just coming to get food . . . they talk about a 'gang of lads' but it's different in different cases. **Chris, Gang Member, Prison A**

It is important to note that estates were identified both as the situational spaces where gangs formed and criminal activities germinated as well as stigmatised spaces within which pejorative labels were applied by wider society. On the former point, all of the participants presented in the previous section referred specifically to 'estates', a point that became apparent through analysis of the data. David, for example, referred to "fight[ing] with rival estates, schools from rival estates". Further, Chris also talked of "different sides, different estates". Finally, one participant delivered a lengthy account that illustrated the linkages between school, area and estates:

And what about your own experiences around gangs? It starts from school, really, you know. As a kid, the fights started from school to school. You go play football match, you go play cricket match, yeh? Or one of your guys got onto the wrong school bus and he's got battered. That's what the gang's formed for, in my opinion anyway. That's how we've started off. Schools and territorialism. Quite a bit of violence. Our school would fight a school from another area; whose kids were from another estate. And we'd see each other in weekends in town and fight each other in town. I'd get . . . you know as kids we'd take hats and watches off each other. And through the years, you always remember who took my hat. So, you'd batter him then. And then he'd get you. **Riaz, Gang Member, Prison A**

4. Discussion

4.1. Retrospective Accounts of Childhood as Central to 'the Gang'

Whilst some participants described the brutally vivid reality of being a child brought up around gang activity, for many others, there was a degree of glamorisation and romanisation to their involvement in 'the gang'. Lauger (2016) has written extensively of this phenomenon, described as 'myth making', whether in relation to the realities of being a gang member or regarding weapon usage by gang members. Regarding the latter, Lauger posits that the 'violence script' is often deliberately

exaggerated through individuals' personal narratives, and that "gang members often create personal and group-based myths by exaggerating their use of weapons and violence" (Lauger 2016, p. 1). Bradley and David[4] both presented highly nuanced personal narratives during their interviews, presenting romanticised narratives of their childhoods[5] David, for example, referred to how "When I look back, I look back fondly, and don't realise that that all shaped my life. I look back and think it was good, it was nice". Indeed, later in the interview, both participants would present a 'violent script' to demonstrate—and perhaps exaggerate—their histories and propensities of violence, similar to Lauger's (2014, 2016) theorisation around the topic. However, Jimmy was by the far the starkest example of presenting a glamorised, near mythical recollection of how he "first held a gun when I was about 12 years old . . . didn't shoot no one or anything like that. But it was a mad feelin'. A feeling of power, know what I'm sayin? Just holding it. Even without the bullets in. Just a mad feelin' of power". This is not to suggest his recollection is false; however, the repetition of how he felt, the extremely young age at which this event occurred, and how he recollected and narrated it with pride and awe during the interview are all indicative of the importance placed on this seminal moment in his life and childhood. This presents 'critical incidents' within gang life as moments that mark a significant escalation in gang involvement and/or engagement in violence. From this, one could infer that such experiences were a prelude to the 'violence script' to which gang members would later subscribe, and when they became entrenched within gang-related activities and practices in later adolescence and adulthood.

Participants' retrospective accounts did not only present romanticised visions of what gang life symbolised, but also the practical benefits gang affiliation conferred. Ryan referred to the "wads of money" his older brother would bring home, and how he "was *just a kid*, so admiring the lifestyle he was living, all the clothes . . . he gave me money all the time. And once I had a little taste of it, I wanted it meself" (my emphasis). Ryan was one of several participants who spoke of financial hardships and physical privations—vicissitudes that were alleviated upon becoming gang affiliated. Bradley's brutally vivid accoun, of a contemporary who started selling crack at the age of eight because "he wanted to put money in his mum's pocket—food in the fridge so she didn't have to go on the streets and see herself" is a classic—albeit extreme—example of Mertonian strain, whereby there are financial hardships and societal pressures to obtain material wealth, despite there being inadequate pathways through which to achieve this (Merton 1968). Romanticised accounts of gang activity, then, were often juxtaposed with the harsh realities of what gang members were trying to escape and formed one component of a wider narrative around the strain that permeated gang members' childhood experiences.

4.2. Estates and Labelling

There has long been debate and discussion around labelling as a criminological concept, and how the application of labels onto individuals can both engender moral panic and, in cases, act as a self-fulfilling prophecy, as well as stigmatising marginalised citizens from an early age (Becker [1963] 1973). Reflecting Wilson's (1987) research on the 'truly disadvantaged' as being concentrated in pockets of acute deprivation—areas which were crucibles of gang activity—participants consistently identified English council estates as arenas in which these activities began, most often during childhood. Similar to the stigmatised 'label' provided by being from public housing projects in the United States, council estates have long been conferred with a similar stigmatising label in the United Kingdom (see, e.g., Jones 2012; McKenzie 2015). For example, Chris' account of being "set up to fail" was the starkest account of an individual alluding to the pernicious effects of labelling. More widely, in the existing academic literature, there has been a focus on how gang members—in particular—feel marginalised by the 'label' of 'gang' being applied to them. It is argued that this leads to stigmatisation by wider

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[4]　In this section, for the sake of conciseness, I do not re-state participants' prisons and "gang statuses"—these are provided in full in the preceding section for each participant.

[5]　Indeed, it was later revealed by one participant that they were stepbrothers, something that illustrates the parallels and overlaps in their experiences and is indicative of many of the familial ties that were found to pervade gangs in the region.

society and a more punitive approach by the criminal justice system as compared to other offenders (Rios 2011). Further, Maitra (2017, pp. 79–80) writes:

> *A further criticism of the process of labelling is that often criminalizes the victims of gang violence, who are labelled as gang members merely because they may live in an area populated by gangs, or associate with peers who are gang members (Rios 2011, pp. 76–77). labelling theory* [further states] *that it places "the actor in circumstances which make it hard for him to continue the normal routines of everyday life and thus provoke him to 'abnormal' actions"* (Becker [1963] 1973, p. 42)

Bill, another respondent, referred to there being "poverty and wealth side by side", and it was invariably the poor 'side' who were stigmatised by negative labelling, and the side from which participants were drawn for this study. Unsurprisingly, there was a close nexus found to exist between geographical areas/spaces (including estates), gang formations and schools. Indeed, schools have formed the backdrop to much youth delinquency and gang-forming activities and practices (see, e.g., Rios 2011). What bonded all of these spaces was the strain and deleterious effects that came from the labels applied to individuals.

In the wider literature, one reason that is often attribute to individuals joining gangs is the 'strain' they feel in wider society: financial strains lead some individuals to engage in law-breaking practices in order to achieve financial rewards (Merton 1968). Indeed, Merton (1968) further argues that the importance placed on financial success and materialism renders these to be highly sought-after commodities, and individuals from economically impoverished backgrounds may resort to crime to achieve a degree of financial success. Alongside this important criminological theory surrounding strain is the equally important theory of labelling[6]; this theoretical perspective is particularly pertinent in relation to gang membership.

What becomes clear is that, in many instances, romanticising experiences within 'the gang' is an attempt to self-rationalise and neutralise the deleterious effects of labelling, and the Mertonian strain that is ordinarily observed in gang members' lived experiences. For example, Riaz's accounts of "quite a lot of violence", as well as "territorialism" and 'battering' individuals from rival gangs, again bears strong parallels to Lauger's (2014) postulations around the 'violence script', namely, (often exaggerated) accounts of gratuitous violence, as delivered by gang members to boost their status and valorise their gang practices. Whereas to most members of law-abiding society, the presentation of these law-breaking behaviours would not be seen as 'romanticising', for gang members, these presentations of hyper-masculine accounts, especially displayed to an 'outsider,' can be seen as countering the negative stigma and labelling borne from being in a gang (see also Maitra 2017).

5. Conclusions

Through an analysis of primary, qualitative data, this paper has sought to demonstrate the axiomatic role childhood plays in the development of gang members' identities and perceptions of self. Childhood experiences often form a central role in their personal narratives and indeed are seen as affecting the trajectory of life paths. Whilst this paper illustrates how many gang members may 'glamorise' their childhood experiences, the reality is often bleaker, with vicissitudes and privations pervading their formative childhood experiences. Nevertheless, what becomes clear is that the pre-adolescence experiences of gang members form a significant part in their life histories and narratives, something often ignored in much of the existing gang scholarship, in which adolescence is investigated with the greatest amount of scrutiny. As the results and discussion of this paper show, however, childhood, schools, area and parental interactions are all important preludes to one's

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6   Alongside the perspectives of labelling theory and Mertonian strain, there is also the topic of moral vitalism and agentic forces in relation to both the commission of criminal acts and in the psychological realm of narratives. However, this topic is outside the scope of this paper.

experiences of life in 'the gang', whether in adolescence or childhood. Moreover, romanticised, retrospective accounts of childhood gang experiences, often mask the strain, negative labelling and vicissitudes gang members have been subjected to, either by society or their personal interactions and experiences.

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