

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

**Ex-gang members who have become help-  
professionals: What influences their desistance from gang  
involvement and their career choice?**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
degree of Master of Social Work in Social Work at Massey  
University, Auckland Campus, New Zealand**

**Gabor Radak**

**2016**

## **ABSTRACT**

The growing population and changing structure of New Zealand gangs have been observed since the 1950s. Well-documented international and local research provides ample information about the process of gang affiliation and gang desistance. However, there is little specific knowledge generated nationally and internationally about the phenomenon of redemption-self (Maruna, 2001), which refers to male ex-criminal gang members taking part in generative exercises such as mentoring youth or counselling substance users. The present study recognises the gap in the literature and aims to develop a discussion and start a dialogue about the benefits of this little-appreciated uncommon phenomenon. To provide deeper understanding of what triggered and hindered ex-criminal gang members' adoption of redemption-self, the qualitative study design, located in the social constructionist framework has been applied. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews with six male former-criminal gang members who have been working in the social service fields in New Zealand for at least two years. Through the thematic analysis of the men's stories four primary themes emerged, which were organised into a thematic map. The primary themes present a continuum that starts with the men's negative childhood experiences attributing to the later stage gang affiliation. The complicated, and often, zigzagged path trajectory of gang desistance, which was triggered by internal changes and external impacts, prepare the final theme's essence - the adoption of redemption-self. Alongside the advantages and benefits of having experience in both the gang and conventional world when service provision is conducted, the difficulties of being accepted into the field with past criminal-gang affiliation is discussed. The four primary themes' content provides the basis of this discussion. The conclusion of the thesis draws on local and overseas programs and initiatives to formulate recommendation for policies, educational initiatives and implications for future research topics.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I have to admit, at times, the joyful journey of the completion of this project was sprinkled with frustrating moments. However, with a number of people's unconditional and ongoing support these frustrating moments were assuaged and made the burden of finishing off this project much lighter.

First of all, I would like to thank my partner Dayna for her relentless caring, support, and perseverance. Her unconditional love not only encouraged me to persist but also provided serenity in stressful moments.

I would like to express my appreciation and humbleness to the six men, who were kind and generous to partake in this project and share a piece of their journey with me. Without these people this project would have been impossible to complete.

I also owe a lot of my appreciation to my supervisors, Dr Moses Faleolo and Dr Michael Dale. I thank Moses for his challenging support, which helped me develop a critical lens and pushed the ever-greater researcher in me. And, I would like to thank Michael, for his shepherding guidance, extra-help and gentle motivation. I would like to thank Dr Polly Yeung for her encouragement and aid to gain financial support from Massey University to accomplish this project full-time.

A big thank you goes to my good friend Peter Osborne for his constant checks on my progress and his wisdom to provide alternative avenues in those certain crossroads of life. I would also like to thank my two good friends Clare and Murray (Eden Devine) for 'willingly' proofreading my work. My appreciation goes to 3216 Crossfit gym owners Anna and Andre, who helped me blow off all the steam and overcome mental fatigue.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my mother, sister and father for being the cornerstones in my life, their ongoing emotional support from the other side of the

globe was always welcome. I would also like to thank Dayna's parents for their emotional support and at times financial assistance.

Finally, I would like to say that I am ever grateful to have and have met such generous and caring people in my life, who greatly contribute daily to my journey on this planet.

# CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	2
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT.....	3
CONTENTS.....	5
LIST OF DIAGRAMS.....	8
<b>CHAPTER ONE - Introduction</b>	
1.1 Introduction.....	9
1.2 Research aims.....	9
1.3 Research questions.....	10
1.4 Classification, Glossary and Brief history of New Zealand gangs.....	10
1.5 My connection to the research.....	19
1.6 Thesis structure.....	24
1.7 Summary.....	25
<b>CHAPTER TWO - Literature Review</b>	
2.1 Introduction.....	26
2.2 Definition of gang.....	27
2.3 Gang socialisation.....	29
2.3.1 Onset phase.....	30
2.3.2 Continuity phase.....	32
2.4 Theories of desistance.....	35
2.5 Redemption-Self.....	42
2.6 Summary.....	45
<b>CHAPTER THREE - Methodology</b>	
3.1 Introduction.....	47
3.2 Theoretical Perspective.....	47
3.2.1 Social constructionism.....	47
3.2.2 Qualitative research.....	50
3.3 Method.....	53
3.3.1 Selection criteria.....	54

3.3.2 Participant recruitment and sample procedure.....	55
3.3.3 Interviews and information collection .....	56
3.4 Analytical framework .....	58
3.4.1 Interpretive description.....	58
3.4.2 Thematic analysis.....	60
3.5 Ethical Considerations.....	62
3.6 Summary.....	66
 <b>CHAPTER FOUR - Findings</b>	
4.1 Introduction.....	67
4.2 Participants.....	68
4.3 Findings – thematic map .....	68
4.3.1 Precursors of gang affiliation.....	70
4.3.1.1 Dysfunctional Family.....	71
4.3.1.2 Environment.....	73
4.3.1.3 Summary.....	74
4.3.2 Continuity .....	75
4.3.2.1 Joining the gang .....	76
4.3.2.2 Gang becomes family.....	77
4.3.2.3 Length of time spent in the gang .....	81
4.3.2.4 Losing connection with outside world.....	82
4.3.2.5 Summary.....	87
4.3.3 Exit .....	87
4.3.3.1 Sign of maturation .....	88
4.3.3.2 Prompters .....	92
4.3.3.3 Lingering Ties.....	93
4.3.3.4 Summary.....	94
4.3.4 Finding a new identity .....	95
4.3.4.1 Finding conventional life-style .....	96
4.3.4.2 Adoption of redemption-self .....	97
4.3.4.3 The past bites back.....	100
4.3.4.4 The importance of understanding both worlds - practicing new identity .....	101
4.3.4.5 Summary.....	104

4.4 Chapter Summary .....	104
<b>CHAPTER FIVE - Discussion</b>	
5.1 Introduction.....	107
5.2 A brief overview of the key findings.....	107
5.3 Discussion of key findings and their consistencies and inconsistencies with local and international studies .....	109
5.4 Summary.....	122
<b>CHAPTER SIX - Conclusion</b>	
6.1 Introduction.....	124
6.2 Review of the aims .....	124
6.3 Key Learnings .....	125
6.4 Suggestions for initiatives and policies for educational providers .....	127
6.6 Limitations and strengths.....	132
6.7 Future research .....	134
6.8 Conclusion .....	135
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>136</b>
<b>APPENDICES</b>	
Appendix A - Information sheet .....	147
Appendix B - Consent form .....	151
Appendix C - Guiding questionnaire .....	152
Appendix D - Advertisement.....	154
Appendix E - Authority to release transcript forms.....	154
Appendix F - Request letter .....	157
Appendix G - Evidence of consultation.....	159
Human Ethics Northern Committee Approval.....	160



## LIST OF DIAGRAMS

<b>Diagram 1: Thematic map .....</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>Diagram 2: Theme of precursors and its subthemes .....</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>Diagram 3: Theme of continuity and its subthemes .....</b>	<b>75</b>
<b>Diagram 4: Theme of exit and its subthemes .....</b>	<b>88</b>
<b>Diagram 5: Theme of finding new identity and its subthemes .....</b>	<b>96</b>