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Beyond the Event of Gang Exit: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis of Aotearoa New Zealand Former Gang Members' Stigma Management During Desistance Maintenance.

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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Gabor Radak

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Abstract

This doctoral thesis investigates the strategies former gang members employ to overcome the challenges of maintaining disengagement from criminal gang life in Aotearoa New Zealand (ANZ). Although there is substantial international and local literature on the processes of gang entry and a growing body of research on gang disengagement, there is limited specific insight into how former gang members maintain a gang free lifestyle, a phenomenon commonly referred to as gang desistance. The present study addresses this gap in the literature and aims to initiate a dialogue about the process of gang desistance sustenance.

To explore this topic, four research questions were posed: What experiences of stigma do desisting gang members have? How do experiences of stigma impact on desisting gang members' emerging former gang member identity development? How do desisting gang members protect their emerging desired identity in the face of adversity? And how does the emerging former gang member identity contribute to the changes in the desisting gang member's social networks?

To address these research questions, data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews with 26 male former criminal gang members, who assumed prosocial roles. Data were analysed using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). To understand how the investigated phenomenon is perceived by individuals or groups, this method employs reflexive exploration and interpretation of subjective lived experiences. The analysis revealed that stigmatising experiences in familial and spatial settings incepted participants' attraction to gang life. However, changes in personal circumstances and growing discontent with the gang lifestyle later initiated a disengagement process.

The study's original contribution lies in demonstrating that participants regarded their gang desistance as not a single event but an ongoing process that requires considerable effort to maintain. More specifically, participants applied a range of progressively proactive stigma

management strategies to navigate reintegration challenges and facilitate their reinsertion into conventional society. Reflecting the dynamic nature of this process, the study conceptualises desistance maintenance as a continuum comprising of three distinguishable phases. The concluding chapter draws on the study's limitations and implications of its findings to propose recommendations for future study designs, potential application of existing prevention and reintegration programmes in strategic gang prevention and intervention measures, and policy reconsiderations regarding the serious youth offender label and the gang patch ban outlined in the Gangs Act (2024).

This doctoral thesis is dedicated to Ms Mary McGrath and Dr Michael Dale.

Mary, you were the one who set me on the path in the field of social work. Your trust and faith in my abilities encouraged me to go further in this career. Michael, you were a great academic mentor, gently shepherding me toward undertaking this enormous project. Although you have departed us and are now safe with your tūpuna, your encouragement and wise words continue to guide me through waters that are anything but for smooth sailing.

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Glossary

This glossary is offered to enhance the readability of the study and is divided into two parts. The first part introduces Te Reo Māori (the language of indigenous people of ANZ) words and terms. These terms are often borrowed into and interwoven with modern New Zealand English, and at times used interchangeably with, or preferred over, the English equivalents. Te Reo Māori words are translated with the help of Te Aka Māori Online Dictionary. While some of these terms may have multiple meanings, the definitions presented here corresponding with their specific use in the context of this study.

The second part addresses colloquial terms and phrases specific to ANZ and its gang context. It also includes the names of local agencies, where their meanings may not be obviously or immediately evident.

Te Reo Māori Words and Terms

Aroha – To love, feel concern for, feel compassion, and empathise

Hapū – Kinship group, clan, or subtribe of a large kinship group and the primary political unit in traditional Māori society. It consisted of a number of whānau sharing descent from a common ancestor, usually being named after the ancestor, but sometimes from an important event in the group's history.

Hui – To gather, congregate, assemble, meet

Iwi – Often refers to tribe or large group of people descended from a common ancestor and associated with a distinct territory.

Kaimahi – Worker, employee, clerk, staff

Kaitiakitanga – Protection, guardianship

Kaumātua – Adult, elder, elderly man – a person of status within a whānau.

Kawa – Customs for the opening of new houses, canoes and other events.

Kōrero – Speak, tell, address, discuss

Kotahitanga – Unity, togetherness, solidarity, collective action

Mahi – To work, perform, practise, also work, job, employment, occupation

Mana – A person's or a group's spiritual power, authority, dignity

Manākitanga – The ethic of kindness, hospitality, and caring for others.

Marae – The open area in front of the wharenui, where formal greetings and discussions take place. Often used to include the complex of buildings around the marae.

Mauri – Life principle, life force, vital essence

Moko – Māori tattooing designs on the face or body done under traditional protocols.

Ngā Kōti Rangatahi – Marae based Youth Court

Pākehā – Foreign, typically applied to New Zealander of European descent.

Pānuitanga – Partnership, one of Te Tiriti o Waitangi principles

Rangatira – High ranking, chiefly, noble, esteemed (also used to refer to the gang leader)

Te Ao Māori – Māori world view

Tino Rangatiratanga – Self-determination, one of Te Tiriti o Waitangi principles

Tikanga – Correct procedure, custom, practice, convention, protocol - the customary system of values and practices that have developed over time and are deeply embedded in the (Māori) social context.

Tūpuna – Ancestors, grandparents

Tukutuku – Ornamental lattice-work used particularly between carvings around the walls of wharenui. Tukutuku panels consist of vertical stakes, horizontal rods, and flexible material of flax, which form the pattern. Each of the traditional patterns has a name.

Utu – To repay, pay, respond

Whaea – Mother, aunt or the term is used to show respect for women in leadership roles.

Whai Wāhi – Participation, one of Te Tiriti o Waitangi principles

Whakahoki – Repeat

Whakapapa – Genealogy, genealogical table, lineage, descent. Reciting whakapapa was, and is, an important skill and reflected the importance of genealogies in Māori society in terms of leadership, land and fishing rights, kinship and status. It is central to all Māori institutions.

Whānau – Family, extended family, the primary economic unit of traditional Māori society. In the modern context the term is sometimes used to include friends who may not have any kinship ties to other members.

Whanaungatanga – Relationship, kinship, sense of family connection; a relationship through shared experiences and working together which provides people with a sense of belonging. It develops as a result of kinship rights and obligations, which also serve to strengthen each member of the kin group. It also extends to others to whom one develops a close familial, friendship or reciprocal relationship.

Whangai – Foster child, adopted child, this is a customary practice. Often a couple's first child was brought up by grandparents or adopted by one of the brothers or sisters of a parent, but almost always the foster child was a blood relation, usually a close relation. Whangai children always knew who their natural parents were. This practice continues today.

Whare – House, building, residence

Wharenui – Meeting house and the main building of a marae where guests are accommodated. Traditionally the wharenui belonged to a hapū or whānau but some modern meeting houses, especially in large urban areas, have been built for non-tribal groups, including schools and tertiary institutions. Many are decorated with carvings, rafter paintings and tukutuku panel.

Terminology and Agency Names

Back Patch – The gang's back patch typically consists of three parts. At the centre is the gang's insignia, flanked above and below by the circumferential badges known as **rockers**. These labels display the preferred colours of the gang and usually communicate the gang's name and its location or territory.

CYFS – The abbreviation of **Child Youth and Family Services**, the former name of **Oranga Tamariki**, which is a government department assigned to provide nationwide care and protection and youth justice services.

Convict Criminologist – The term refers to a group of ex-prisoners who turned academics and apply their insider perspective to progress the criminological, sociological, psychological, and social work understanding of the impacts of incarceration (Honeywell, 2023).

Gang Chapter – Is a regional subgroup of larger gang organisation. Each chapter has its own leadership (in most cases) and operate within a defined territory. While a chapter follows the broader goals and culture of the gang organisation, it usually focuses on activities within their geographical area and may also incorporate rules and norms specific to the chapter.

Ministry of Social Development (MSD) – A government department responsible for delivering social services and assistance, with the core objective of improving communities' social well-being.

Pad – Gang's assembly or meeting place, typically a fortified private property where entry is exclusive to members or invitations.

Patched Member – Fully iniated member of the gang, who has been awarded the right to wear the gang patch.

Pres' – A colloquial term for president or the leader of the gang.

Prospect – A person who is aspiring to become a patched member. A prospect typically spends a long period of demonstrating their loyalty to the gang before becoming a patched holder.

Wounded Healer – Borrowed from Father Peter Young of Albany, New York, Maruna (2001) describes professionals who themselves lived a deviant life before transforming and utilising the shameful past to "help guide others in the right direction" (Maruna, 2001, p.11). Other terms developed to capture this concept is Cressey's (1955) retroflexive transformation, Brown's (1991b) professional-ex, and Maruna's (2001) redeemed professional.

Chapter One

Introduction

This chapter introduces the thesis objectives by highlighting the gap in the literature surrounding the maintenance of gang desistance. It then outlines the research questions, which focus on the strategies former gang members employ to navigate stigma, pursue conventional goals, and build relationships through social interactions in conventional settings. These questions are framed within my researcher positioning, shaped by my background and prior knowledge relating to gang desistance. To situate how former gang members' stigma management styles, skills, and perspectives develop so that they later draw on them in their prosocial roles this chapter explores the social and psychological factors influencing gang socialisation. The chapter then proceeds to discuss the evolution of gang definitions and to identify the definition most relevant to the sociocultural landscape of ANZ, a context considered the primary contributor to Māori overrepresentation in gangs and the rise of gang culture. To further illustrate the influence of sociocultural factors, certain historical developments that acted as key ingredients in the formation of modern gangs are discussed. Finally, the chapter concludes with an overview of the thesis structure.

Introduction and Development of Research Objectives

Having spent time within a social group, a member is vastly different from a non-member, as the latter has never internalised the group's norms, practices, or formed deep relationships and shared experiences with other group members (Ebaugh, 1988). Consequently, the phrase "it takes one (or those close to him) to know one" signifies the depth of lived experience and insider knowledge necessary to truly understand what it takes to leave the group

(Goffman, 1963, p. 85). This observation is particularly relevant for former criminal gang members, who assume prosocial roles.

Even though their position in such roles often sparks controversy (Hipkiss, 2016), former gang members are well suited to these roles. As Goffman (1963) explains, the pain of stigma is more easily understood and the techniques used to conceal it are more readily detected by a fellow-sufferer or the wise[1] with the insider knowledge of the tricks of the trade (Markowitz & Engelman, 2017; Robinson, 1994). This is reflected in ANZ, where criminal gang members, who have successfully transitioned, are now participating in helping professions or faith-based roles (1news, 2021; Biddle, 2017; Garner, 2018; Walls, 2021).

Despite the growing presence of former gang members in helping professions and a surge of scholarly interest to investigate the phenomenon of gang exit (Decker & Pyrooz, 2020), much remains to be understood about what happens after individuals disengage or leave the gang, and how they construct new identities in their conventional settings (Carson & Vecchio, 2015). Maruna (2001) contends that literature often conflates factors that spur a rational decision to leave crime and gang involvement (typically associated with a single symbolic event described as turning point) with the deeper and ongoing process of self-change. He further argues that this latter phase is distinguishable from the act of exit, because the skills required to bring on behaviour change differ from those necessary to maintain it. Therefore, in this phase, the emphasis shifts from the act of exiting to the continued effort needed to uphold prosocial behaviours. Maruna (2001, p. 27) refers to this process as desistance, arguing that "in the face of widespread social stigma, limited career opportunities, and social exclusion", it is factors like personality traits, social interactions, and social settings "that allow for long-term persistence in various [prosocial] behaviours".

[1]According to Goffman (1963), the wise is a person who is not directly stigmatised but due to their relationship with a stigmatised person, has knowledge and insight into the impact of stigmatising societal conditions.

After conducting a thorough search of both national and international literature, it became evident that only a handful of studies (Rosen & Cruz, 2018; Lee & Bubolz, 2020) specifically address what occurs beyond gang exit and how stigma generates what Nugent and Schinkel (2016, p. 569) describe as "the pains of desistance", a phenomenon considered to lead to desistance failure. While these studies provide valuable insights into challenges faced by desisting gang members, they fail to outline the motivating factors and coping methods desisters utilise to avoid gang re-entry and assume conventional roles in the face of rejection and discrimination. This gap in the literature gives rise to the following objectives of this study:

1. the relationships between gang desistance and stigma management;
2. how stigma can hinder one's desistance progression, and to cast light on why at times desistance fails and takes a zig-zag path between conventional and gang worlds before it is accomplished; and
3. initiate a dialogue about the varying stigma management methods desisting former members use to navigate the challenges of reintegration and to accomplish conventional goals.

Consequently, this study focuses on how desistance is achieved and maintained among ANZ gang members. More specifically, the research questions, outlined in the next section, explore in detail the strategies former gang members employ to navigate stigma, pursue goals, and build relationships in conventional settings. To capture the complexity and nuance of this phenomenon, while preserving the authenticity of participants' voices, their accounts are analysed with interpretive phenomenology. Given the central role of interpretation in this methodological approach, it is essential to consider my background and assumptions and to reflect on the ways these positionalities, or researcher lens, influenced my interactions with the participants and shaped the production of this study.

Positioning the Researcher and Research Questions

In its international reputation, ANZ is seldom portrayed as an Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) country with "one of the highest rates of gang activity globally" (Breetzke et al., 2021, p. 1). Consequently, as a Hungarian born man, who travelled to visit the country's beautiful scenery, I had limited knowledge and let alone connection with ANZ gangs. My interest in gangs, particularly how people disengage from them, began to formulate, after Christchurch City Mission Night Shelter supervisor, Ms Mary McGrath offered me a social worker position at the night shelter. Her compassionate approach to every man who entered the shelter helped me develop new perspectives and an empathetic approach to those labelled as outsiders and existed on the fringes of the conventional society.

Although gang affiliation was seldom discussed openly in the shelter, we frequently had residents who were former and active gang members. They were typically older men, who in private conversation opened up and shared about their childhood experiences and circumstances that led them to join gangs. Through these discussions, I gained a general understanding of how gangs function, and the social and structural conditions that influence individuals to enter, exit, or remain emotionally and socially connected to the gang life. I have also learnt that underlying factors of gang entry such as trauma and social exclusion were often the very reason that generated behaviours (addiction, impulsivity, and violence) that also propelled these individuals towards homelessness.

Following this position, I continued to work in various social work fields, where I came across transformed active or former gang members, who had assumed helping roles within social services. Their shared sociocultural backgrounds appeared to facilitate easier engagement and rapport building with the service users. As I later came to understand, this is

neither a new nor an unusual phenomenon, because as early as 1955, Cressey already articulated this dynamic in his theory of retroflexive transformation[2].

Through discussions with these people, I developed a deeper understanding of the social structure of ANZ gangs, the factors influencing individuals' decision to exit, and their motivation for entering helping professions. In reflection, I also recognised parallels with my own personal adolescent experiences of belonging to a subculture, which fostered a sense of connection to these colleagues and sparked my curiosity to explore former gang members' transition. My interest in academic inquiry of this topic culminated in a Master of Social Work research thesis (Radak, 2016). Although this project provided an in-depth insight into the history of ANZ gangs, pathways into and out of gangs, and the redemptive journeys of former gang members, it also raised several new questions, which ultimately informed the development of the following research questions:

1. What experiences of stigma do desisting gang members have?
2. How do experiences of stigma impact on desisting gang members' emerging former gang member identity development?
3. How do desisting gang members protect their emerging desired identity in the face of adversity?
4. How does the emerging former gang member identity contribute to the changes in the desisting gang member's social networks?

As this study's primary focus is to develop an in-depth understanding of the gang desistance process and how desisters transition into prosocial roles, it is essential to first examine the psychological and sociological factors that drive individuals to join and identify with gangs. Understanding these formative experiences is crucial for capturing the full

[2]Cressey's (1955, 1965) retroflexive transformation is further elaborated in Chapter Two (p. 53).

trajectory of gang life and for recognising how they potentially develop the skills desisted gang members later draw on in social and faith-based sector roles.

Gang Socialisation Factors

Over the decades ample studies have been conducted to discuss the variety of sociological and psychological risk factors that drive individuals to socialise with a gang. Tolan and Gorman-Smith (1998, p. 68) establish that "the culmination of neurological, psychological, and social damage to the child" can impair their ability to sufficiently control impulsivity and deliver socially appropriate behaviours. They argue that conduct type behaviours such as violence, defiance, disobedience, and other forms of misconduct are developed and displayed as responses to social and environmental conditions (Savage, 2009).

Farrington (2005) and Farrington et al. (2001) posit that the home environment serves as the primary arena for socialisation where children by internalising their family's beliefs and values in accordance with parental expectations and parenting style, acquire key personality characteristics. Exposure to parental or other influential family members' criminal conduct and negative attitudes towards authority can hinder healthy social development and lead to intergenerational transmission of antisocial tendencies (Lemert, 1951; Lipsey & Derzon, 1999; Thornberry et al., 1993; Thornberry, Krohn, et al., 2003; Thornberry, Lizotte, et al., 2003).

Comber (1981), Hill et al. (1999), and Howell and Egley (2005) also identify that family structural instability such as separation from biological parents, living in a single parent household, or frequent changes in caregivers may reduce the effectiveness of parenting. Such disruptions may elicit limited parental supervision, neglect, maltreatment, and unrealistic expectations often resulting in parent-child conflict (Moffitt, 1993; Robins, 1979; Wolfe & Mosk, 1983). These deficits can weaken children's attachment to adult figures and indirectly contribute to the development of antisocial and delinquent behaviour. More directly, though,

what Kempe et al. (1962, p. 17) describe as " the battered-children syndrome" (serious physical abuse), has been shown to accelerate children's tendency to display disobedience and engage in impulsive and violent behaviour (Loeber & Farrington, 1998; Russell et al., 2015).

Eroded social bond to the family and other adult figures can be detrimental on young people's socialisation within their wider community (Hirschi, 2017). Indeed, Farrington (2005), Frost (2011), Goffman (1959), and Patterson and Dishion (1985) posit that children and youth who exhibit problematic behaviour are often labelled as delinquent. Such designations frequently result in rejection and social exclusion, particularly in schools and neighbourhoods, propelling youth towards peer bands where delinquency is not only accepted but actively reinforced (De Vito, 2021; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Dunbar, 2018; Dupéré et al., 2007; Gilbert, 2013; Moffitt, 1993; Patterson & Dishion, 1985; Pyrooz, 2012; Shaw & McKay, 1942; Tamatea, 2015; Thrasher, 1927; Tremblay, 2003; Young et al., 2014).

This perspective supports the argument that "[t]hese individuals are likely to engage in delinquency and drug use regardless of their membership in gangs" (Thornberry et al., 1993, p. 57). From this viewpoint, it is personal characteristics or the *kind of person*, rather than the gang's social structure and practices, that primarily drive engagement in delinquency. Supporters of this approach argue that these traits cause the glorification of and motivation to pursue a criminal lifestyle (Alleyne & Wood, 2014; Cohen, 1955; Glueck & Glueck, 1940; Hirschi, 1969; Miller, 1958; Spergel, 1990; Thornberry et al., 1993).

On the other hand, the social facilitation or *kind of group* approach, rooted in Sutherland and Cressey's (1955) differential association[3] theory emphasises that gang members are not inherently different from non-gang members (Sutherland et al., 1992). The proponents of this social facilitation model view, if gang members are left "to their own devices", the frequency

[3]Expanded in Sutherland et al., (1992), differential association theory posits that delinquency can be associated with the individuals' personal characteristics and sociocultural background but it is learnt through intimate peer groups, in which delinquent behaviours are transmitted and reinforced amongst members through frequent interactions and socialisation.

and seriousness of their offending would not be categorically different from non-gang members (Thornberry et al., 1993, p. 58). Offending behaviour is, therefore, not solely an individual choice but a product of social structures that pave pathways into gangs, where group dynamics further exacerbate delinquency (Elliot et al., 1979; Sarnecki, 1990; Short & Strodtbeck, 1965).

Indeed, classical gang research suggests that the composition of disorganised and loose communities characterised by poverty, population density, frequent demographic migration, and limited job opportunities create an environment where youth are more likely to be exposed to criminal and delinquent activities (Thrasher, 1927; Whyte, 1943). This exposure can increase youth's motivation to either join an existing, or form their own, delinquent youth groups (Breetzke et al., 2021; Faleolo, 2014; Lemert, 1951, 1972; Thornberry et al., 1993) .

More recently, the prison environment has also been identified as a spatial risk factor for gang entry (Gilbert, 2024). As not all individuals enter prison as gang members, incarceration can prompt consideration of joining a gang as a means of adapting to the new environment. In prisons, gangs offer protection from violent and intimidating inmates, opportunities for interpersonal relationship, a sense of prestige, and access to material goods that might otherwise be inaccessible or difficult to obtain (Bolden, 2020; Brotherton & Barrios, 2004; Brown et al., 2023; Pyrooz, 2023; Sorensen et al., 2024).

Drawing on this, Lee and Bubolz (2024, p. 108) propose that the course of "joining a gang occurs over an extended period of time", but upon entry, the gang's "social suction"[4] takes immediate effect (Moule et al., 2013, p. 146). In practice, this process further depletes members' ties with prosocial institutions, such as non-gang peers and relatives, school, employment, and church. This observation again parallels Cressey's (1955) differential association theory, which posits that members' socialisation within the gang fosters absorption

[4]Van Gemert and Fleisher (2005) describe this concept as the grip of the group.

of its legal codes and definitions (or norms and practices), which in turn rapidly accelerates criminal capital[5] accrual (McCarthy & Hagan, 1995).

Eroded prosocial connections, coupled with increased delinquent and antisocial activities exposes members to further stigmatisation while simultaneously knifes off[6] future opportunities (Anderson, 2000; Bernburg, 2009). It is therefore, the gang's social suction that drives further marginalisation and produces what Pyrooz et al. (2013, p. 243) describe as "gang embeddedness" or the "adhesion of the gang member to the gang." Building on this, Melde and Esbensen (2011) contend that due to its capacity to the redirect life course, gang entry constitutes a turning point, where embeddedness becomes evident through members' overt identification with, and status within the gangs' enduring social networks.

Lemert's (1951, 1972) social reaction theory[7] underpins this concept contending that the deeper an individual become embedded in a delinquent role, the more their self-perception aligns with the characteristics of that role. Building on Cooley's (1902) looking glass theory[8], Lemert argues that individuals' responses to social reactions regarding delinquency manifests in two forms: the primary and secondary deviance. Primary deviance refers to the initial acts of rule breaking that is corrected with minimal social reactions, while secondary deviance

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[5]According to McCarthy and Hagan (1995) criminal capital is antipodal to social capital (see more information on social capital in Chapter Two, p. 32), as one's embeddedness in criminal activities and organisations generates social ties and bond with equally delinquent individuals. These relationships can provide a platform for exchanging and refining criminal skills, while also driving investment in criminal enterprises. As a result, criminal capital depletes prosocial ties, thus social capital. Diminished social capital can make it problematic to pursue conventionally accepted goals such as obtaining gainful employment or to enrol in further education after or in attempt to leaving the criminal world (Moule et al., 2013).

[6]In its metaphorical sense the term knife off has been widely utilised in the gang and crime socialisation to refer to the negative impact of continued delinquency (and gang entry) on individuals' future opportunities/aspiration (especially during the desistance process) to accomplish conventionally desired goals (such as obtaining meaningful employment or entering education) and gain access to prosocial networks (Laub & Sampson, 1996, 1997; Moffitt, 1993; Moule et al., 2013; Pyrooz et al., 2013). Conversely, in the gang and crime desistance literature, the term relates to individuals' abrupt change in or severance of ties with criminal organisations, harmful environments, or delinquent behaviour traits to accomplish desistance from crime or gang involvement, achieve desired goals, and gain entry in prosocial networks (Maruna & Roy, 2007).

[7]Lemert's (1951, 1972) social reaction or secondary deviance theory is discussed in Chapter Three (p. 66)

[8]Looking glass theory is further detailed in Chapter Three (pp. 62)

emerges when repeated and more serious delinquent acts elicit more severe social reactions, compelling individuals to adopt or be prescribed roles.

Being labelled as a delinquent alters social interactions within social settings. Over time, these interactions produce the internalisation of role characteristics, which shape self-perception and behaviours consistent with role expectations (Link et al., 1989; Matsueda & Heimer, 1997). Identity, therefore, "does not just happen", instead it "is an ongoing process that emerges from individuals' interpretative and communicative efforts" (Phelan & Hunt, 1998, p. 278), and reflects "the shared social meanings that persons attribute to themselves in a role" (Burke & Reitzes, 1991, p. 242). In this light, the gang's social suction effect by restricting members' interactions outside the gang networks, amplifies the gang member identity, which can eventually supersede other identity dimensions (Lee & Bubolz, 2024).

Stryker (1968) describes this identity as salient or dominant because its characteristics, such as problem solving strategies, are frequently invoked across a wide range of seemingly unrelated situations (Mead, 1934; Stryker, 1968). Dominant identity is, therefore, a reliable indicator of behaviour traits expected of the role holder. In addition, it often produces observable external changes that also demonstrates one's commitment to the role (Becker, 1960; Blumer, 1986; Matsueda, 1992; Stryker, 1968).

Phelan and Hunt (1998) argue that individuals' choice to act (using hand signals and walk), dress and tattoo themselves in a particular way serves as a visible confirmation of membership in a social group (Phelan & Hunt, 1998; Sanders, 1988; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). Thus, physical appearance by conveying cues about one's social role, enabling others to assess their social status and moral careers (Goffman, 1961; McNaughton, 2007; Unger, 1962). These external signifiers also indicate readiness to behave in ways associated with the stereotypes attached to these roles and reflect a volunteer endorsement of social stigma or a symbolic "alienation from mainstream norms and social networks" (Sanders, 1988, p. 397).

Accordingly, dominant identity combined with physical appearance reflects behaviour traits influenced by the group's norms and practices, while also signal anticipated future aspirations (Andrae et al., 2017b; Demello, 1993; Phelan & Hunt, 1998). Expanding on this notion, Tamatea (2015, 2017) points out that life-long or intergenerational gang affiliation in ANZ is often a by-product of social inequalities, where compounding stigmas[9] of ethnic origin, socioeconomic disadvantage, and ex-convict background contribute to marginalisation. As established earlier, perception of alienation increases inclination to seek refuge, identity, and recognition in gangs. The following section explores how debates around gang membership definitions evolved to incorporate sociocultural factors and outlines the rationale for adopting Brotherton and Barrios' (2004) gang conceptualisation in this thesis.

Definition of Gangs

Although the term gang has various connotations, it has now become interchangeable with groups exhibiting criminal characteristics operating outside the norms and values of the conventional society (Sanchez-Jankowski, 1991). In his seminal work *The gang: A study of 1,313 gangs in Chicago,* Thrasher (1927) was one of the first to ascribe this term to characterise rebellious juvenile groups. His empirical study has since become the touchstone for scholarly research, which over the decades has expanded on Thrasher's original definition incorporating the following attributes: communal, organisational, hierarchical, territorial, and profit-driven through criminal activities.

According to Ball and Curry (1995), not all gang definitions are equally effective, but they all serve a purpose, which is to describe what constitutes a gang and who qualifies as a

[9]Goffman (1963) distinguishes between three distinct attributes namely the abominations of the body, blemishes of character, and tribal affiliation (race and religion), which produce socially enacted stigma (for further information, see Chapter Two, pp. 43-47). Tamatea's concept of gang members' triple stigmatisation falls within the categories of blemishes of character and tribal stigma. Additionally, the voluntary use of conspicuous gang marks on body (such as facial tattoos or gang paraphernalia) meets Goffman's third type of stigma.

gang member at a given point in time within a particular social and geographical context. Consequently, Horowitz (1990) argues that applying a universal gang definition that is derived from a specific gang study, with its own unique social contexts, methodology, and investigation methods, can only obscure other gangs' distinctive historical, social, and geographical makeup.

This prompted critiques like Junger-Tas and Marshall (1999), Ball and Curry (1995), and Lala (1996) to argue that methodological bias (stemming from a different approach to explore gangs such as crime prevention or social intervention) can shape the findings and, therefore, the formulation of a definition. In their view, research should remain flexible and context-aware and avoid formulating fixed definitions, which may fail to address the root causes of gangs and lead to over-policing and criminalisation of marginalised communities, inadvertently generating resistant groups. By building on this critique, Petersen (2000) advocates for developing a definition from studying gangs at a localised and detailed level and involving individuals with first-hand experience to reveal similarities that exist across gangs.

Parallel with Petersen's argument, Spergel (1995) proposes that for a contextual and micro-level examination, scholarly attention should shift from gang behaviour to the complex social conditions within which gangs emerge. For example, as recognised in Thrasher's (1927) classical work, impoverished communities foster competition and conflict over limited resources prompting the organisation of gangs as a response. Based on these arguments, Brotherton and Barrios (2004, p. 23) assert that gang definitions should move beyond solely addressing criminal gang behaviour and define gangs as:

> a group formed largely by youth and adults of a marginalized social class which aims to provide its members with a resistant identity, an opportunity to be individually and collectively empowered, a voice to speak back to and challenge the dominant culture, a refuge from the stresses and strains of barrio or ghetto life.

In this context, gangs are not merely criminal entities, instead social structures that respond to systemic inequalities by offering alternative peer groups to the disenfranchised and provide access to material resources in communities where conventional institutions fall short of meeting these needs. These advantages create competitive pathways for advancing social position. Additionally, the appealing sources of support, validation, and recognition foster members' social bond and enhance their gang identity (Sanchez-Jankowski, 1991). This sociocultural perspective underpins the rational for selecting Brotherton and Barrios' definition of gangs, which is particularly relevant to ANZ context for the following reasons.

ANZ gangs are social organisations that have been present for a significant time and have become an integral part of the social tapestry. They have developed within the marginalised and disadvantaged communities as an adaptation to the dominant society's discrimination of individuals or groups who possess undesired and negatively viewed characteristics such as "ethnicity, low socioeconomic status, and antisociality" (Tamatea, 2015, para. 1). To compensate for the impoverished and discriminated social status, gangs provide their members prestige and material rewards.

However, not all and not every chapter[10] of the larger gangs focus on creating profit through criminal enterprise. In fact, certain chapters of Mongrel Mob (Savage, 2019; Walls, 2021) and Black Power (Davis, 2022) have evolved into collectives which instead of encouraging antisocial and criminal conduct to gain profit, actively promote prosocial engagement amongst their members. This is recognised by Gilbert (2013, p. IX), who distinguishes non-criminal gang and defines it as "a structured group (of five or more people) that maintains an exclusive membership marked by common identifiers and formal rules that supersede the rules of the state".

[10]The term's meaning in this context is outlined in the Glossary.

This is an important addition, because in ANZ, it is not uncommon for individuals to retain membership in certain gangs, while simultaneously holding roles in social or religious sectors (Biddle, 2017; Garner, 2018; Husband, 2017, 2021; Stowell, 2016). This dynamic may seem atypical as Gilbert observes, "it so runs against the grain of what we expect a gang to do and expect a gang to behave" (Journeyman Pictures, 2015, 11:03). However, as Gilbert further notes "as the membership of these gangs have matured, the gangs themselves have matured", and consequently the public has increasingly been exposed to "the vastly different set of behaviours[11] and a vastly different outlook on life" that former, and at times, even active gang members are demonstrating (Journeyman Pictures, 2015, 4:47). Understanding how some gangs and some chapters have evolved into more prosocial entities requires attention to the broader historical and structural context of ANZ, which will be presented in the next section.

The Aotearoa New Zealand Context

Anecdotally, the growing trend of former or active redeemed gang members' engagement in employment, education, or volunteer work in social or religious sectors has gained wider social acceptance. These transitions are hardly surprising because, as noted, many members of what Gilbert (2010, 2013) defines as organised gangs have since matured and become partners, fathers, and grandparents, and are now seeking to redeem their past actions and prevent the next generation from following their footsteps (Maruna, 2001; Radak, 2016).

This pattern is also understandable when considering estimates from the National Gang List (NGL), which indicate a steady increase in gang affiliation since 2010 (Gilbert, 2024; Newshub, 2022; Parliamentary Service, 2022). Most recent figures show patched and prospect members of adult gangs now exceed 10,000 (Collins, 2025). However, Gilbert (2024, p. 9)

[11]The behaviour traits typically associated with gang members are discussed in the previous section of Gang Socialisation Factors (p. 6).

cautions that these numbers were likely inexact, as NGL being a Police intelligence tool "without the support of gang members", often includes individuals who have left the gang or whose gangs no longer exist, which suggests that entry on NGL is easier than removal from it.

He further argues that NGL's susceptibility to political sanitisation aimed at inflating policy effectiveness and reduced gang visibility following the gang insignia ban render NGL an unreliable source for precise estimation of membership rates (Collins, 2025; McCulloch, 2024). Still, with this high per capita membership rate relative to its population of 5.3 million (Parliamentary Service, 2022; Stats NZ-Tatauranga Aotearoa, 2024), ANZ is considered one of the most gang active OECD nations (Breetzke et al., 2021; The Economist, 2018).

The disproportionate representation of Māori, the indigenous people of ANZ, in prisons also gives cause for concern. While the Māori population makes up 15% of ANZ's total population, over 50% of the prison population identifies as Māori (Brown et al., 2023; Department of Corrections-Te Ara Poutama Aotearoa, 2025; Ministry of Justice-Te Tāhū o te Ture, 2023; Parliamentary Service, 2022). Although not all Māori prisoners are gang members, approximately 70% of incarcerated gang members are Māori (Gilbert, 2024; Parliamentary Service, 2022). As discussed earlier, gangs exert significant informal control across ANZ prison system (Gilbert, 2024; Hu, 2025).[12] Thus, given their overrepresentation in prisons and strong kinship ties, Māori are particularly vulnerable to recruitment into gangs while incarcerated (Taonui & Newbold, 2013).

These statistics prompt a critical question: why are Māori grossly overrepresented in these negative social factors? By exploring key historical developments in ANZ, the following section uncovers some of the structural and systemic dynamics contributing to this imbalance.

[12]The influence of prison gangs are discussed in more detail on p. 8.

Aotearoa New Zealand Historical Events and the Development of Gangs

To provide an insight into what produces the high gang membership rate amongst Māori, it is important to overview those major historical events that formed ANZ's social structural context. Despite contemporary politicians preferring to refute the connection (New Zealand First, 2024), local scholars like Gilbert (2010), Kisby (2019), McIntosh (2011), Newbold and Taonui (2020), Quince (2007), Taonui and Newbold (2013), Te Aika and Taonui (2010), Winter (1998), and Workman (2014) find clear correlation between the British Empire's colonisation of Aotearoa and the development and rise of the modern-day gangs.

The establishment of European settlements in Aotearoa began shortly after the British explorer James Cook visited the islands in 1769. As the number of British settlers rose, skirmishes with the Māori began to increase (Orange, 1989). On 6 February 1840, the British Crown representatives and many (but not all) Māori chiefs signed Te Tiriti o Waitangi or the Treaty of Waitangi[13] with the intention to ease the growing tension. However, the signing of the foundational document of ANZ did not deescalate the issues; instead it sealed the Aotearoa' future as one of the colonial outposts of the British Empire.

This (the treaty) enabled the colonial government to form polices which subjected Māori to the British class-centred bureaucratic and political system (Eggleston, 1997). The dishonouring and violation of the terms of Te Tiriti's terms manifested in the Māori land wars, which began in 1843 and ended in 1870 with Māori defeat. The consequences were devastating as Māori were forcefully relocated and their ancestral lands were annexed, their rights to self-governance and sovereignty promised in Te Tiriti were suppressed, and like other colonised native peoples Māori assumed a second-class citizenship on their own land (Andrae et al., 2017a). Unsurprisingly, racial discrimination and social alienation in the now dominant British

[13]The Treaty of Waitangi's Māori version is Te Tiriti o Waitangi. The documents were signed by the British Crown representatives and over 540 chiefs of Māori tribes (39 chiefs refrained from signing them). Most Māori chiefs only signed Te Tiriti. There are significant translative differences between the Treaty and Te Tiriti (Orange, 2012).

society drove the majority of Māori to remain in rural areas under impoverished conditions while Pākehā predominantly settled in wealthier urban centres (Andrae et al., 2017a; Keenan, 2012; Orange, 2012). This uneven distribution of resources and opportunities further entrenched economic disparities, limiting Māori access to adequate education, health care, employment, and political influence (Bartholomew, 2020).

A shift in geographical separation began in the 1950s when ANZ experienced an economic and industrial boom and the need for labourers increased (Belich, 2001; Collette & O'Malley, 1974; Eggleston, 1997; Gilbert, 2013). Māori were enticed to migrate to urban areas for better pay. "Although better off than the rural kin" (Taonui & Newbold, 2013, p. 178), due to lack of training and tradable skills Māori were employed in lower paying semi or unskilled jobs. Similarly, around this time Pacific peoples, particularly Samoans, were invited to migrate to ANZ and fill the shortage of manual labour in mass production factories and service sectors (Faleolo, 2014; Fleras & Spoonley, 1999; Thorns & Sedgwick, 1997).

This rapid "urban drift that saw large numbers of Maori [*sic*] move from rural to urban centres" had negative consequences (Gilbert, 2010, p. 686). Systemic discrimination and economic marginalisation in the dominant Pākehā society led Māori and Pacific peoples to concentrate in disorganised and impoverished housing areas and suburbs (Bartholomew, 2020). Disconnection from traditional tribal practices also contributed to breakdown of formal and informal social controls, which in turn exacerbated social stresses including elevated rates of alcohol consumption, violence, police scrutiny, incarceration, family dysfunctionality, and child abuse and neglect (Gilbert, 2013; Metge, 1964; Sinclair, 1991; Taonui & Newbold, 2013).

Although attempts were made to raise ethnic consciousness and maintain cultural identities through the establishment of pan-tribal marae in urban areas, city life often produced further social fragmentation and feelings of marginalisation and displacement from whakapapa, communal support systems, and cultural practices amongst the new generation of urban Māori

and Pasifika[14] (Kawharu, 1968). By the 1960s, these social issues had cumulatively resulted in a sharp rise in state intervention with urban Māori and Pasifika communities, with many children and youth removed from their whānau under the pretext of safety and welfare concerns (McIntosh, 2011; Stanley, 2016, 2017; Taonui & Newbold, 2013; Winter, 1998).

The widespread uplifting not only fractured families but the forced placements in state run care institutions and foster homes exposed Māori and Pasifika children and youth to ongoing neglect, dehumanisation, sexual and physical abuse at the hands of staff and other residents (Brown et al., 2023; Royal Commission of Inquiry, 2022; Savage et al., 2021; Stanley, 2016). These placements and life in disorganised suburbs brought Māori and Pasifika youth into contact with similarly socially deprived, excluded, and rebellious working-class European counterparts, many of whom were brought up in solo-parent families (Gilbert, 2013; Ministry of Social Development-Te Manatū Whakahiato Ora, 2008). By that time, these European youth had begun organising their own subculture, which predominantly took shape as outlaw motorcycle gangs (Ministry of Social Development-Te Manatū Whakahiato Ora, 2006, 2008; Te Aika & Taonui, 2010).

Although early colonial newspapers documented the delinquent activities of youth deported from English prisons, the 1950s are generally regarded as the era when the first gangs appeared on ANZ's social landscape. These incipient gangs formed out of loosely connected decadent youth groups such as the Bodgies and Milk Bar Cowboys, which were heavily influenced by American film, music, and media (Dennehy & Newbold, 2001; Eggleston, 1997; Gilbert, 2013). Despite their fleeting existence, these groups characterised by their rebellious

[14]"During the 1950s and 1960s when large numbers of migrants from the South Pacific Oceanic region known as Polynesia they were labelled as Pacific Islanders. However, during the 1970s and 1980s, these Pacific Islanders had children who had grown up and disliked being called a Pacific Islander so in recognition of NZ-born Pacific Islanders the term Pasifika emerged to represent Island-born and NZ-born peoples" (Faleolo, 2014, p. 4). Honouring the preferred term, in this thesis, Pasifika is used to jointly refer to peoples from the diverse Pacific Island nations.

attitudes and distinctive style, are considered the forerunners of modern gangs (Eggleston, 1997, 2009; Ministry of Social Development-Te Manatū Whakahiato Ora, 2006).

In the 1960s, a real turn in gangs' structural and organisational arrangement became evident after the American motorcycle gang, the Hells Angles established their first overseas chapter in ANZ. Their arrival marked a pivotal moment in the evolution of ANZ gangs, as it introduced a formalised hierarchical system with roles like President, Vice President, Sergeant at Arms, Foot Soldiers (Patched Members), and Prospects. Additionally, the Hells Angels implemented codes of conduct, specific rules regarding attire (such as back patch and top and bottom rockers[15]), and a territorial claim over a specific geographic area (Gilbert, 2010).

The clarity in organisation, provided by this new formal structure "allowed local youths [to develop] a greater understanding of how gangs could look and operate" (Ministry of Social Development-Te Manatū Whakahiato Ora, 2008, p. 14). This made gangs more appealing and increased their member retention as well-defined roles and structure that fostered a sense of belonging, purpose, and identity. Recognising its effectiveness, several other newly established motorcycle gangs promptly emulated Hells Angels' organisational architecture (Gilbert, 2013).

Due to the traumatic experiences, social dislocation, loss of cultural identity, and loss of trust in their own and state institutions, it is hardly surprising that urban Māori and Pasifika youth sought each other for support and comradery (Andrae et al., 2017a; Gilbert, 2013). The amalgamation of "outward projection of internalised an ger [and discontent] derived from oppressive socio-economic, political and cultural forces" (Taonui & Newbold, 2013, p. 181) with the readily available template of subculture which dwelt "on the outskirts of conventional society" (Andrae et al., 2017a, p. 120) enabled urban Māori and Pasifika youth to formulate their identity through either joining existing or establishing their own gangs.

[15]The elements of a gang logo are further detailed in the Glossary under the entry of Back patch.

During the economic downturn and restructuring in the 1970s, unemployment rates rose sharply amongst Māori and Pasifika population (Faleolo, 2014). The economic disadvantage became a key factor in the rise of the gangs that blended the European gang structure with Māori and Pasifika cultural elements (Quince, 2007). Their popularity grew not only because they infused traditional elements like moko (facial tattoos) modified to represent gang affiliation but also because they functioned like substitute families offering whanaungatanga (belonging and kinship), resistance, and kotahitanga (unity and identity) in the face of systemic discrimination and economic hardship (McIntosh, 2011; Taonui & Newbold, 2013; Te Aika & Taonui, 2010).

As "the average age of gang membership began to increase" (Breetzke et al., 2020, p. 4), gang membership retainment became progressively long-term often leading to life-long or intergenerational affiliation. By the end of 1970s and the beginning of 1980s, Police reports estimated that Māori surpassed all other ethnicities in gang affiliation (Gilbert & Newbold, 2006; Howman, 1972; Ministry of Social Development-Te Manatū Whakahiato Ora, 2008).

The rapid growth of Māori gang membership was further cultivated by the Mongrel Mob and Black Power. These two arguably ethnically homogenous gangs[16] became dominant through offering a modified sense of cultural identity and community solidarity that resisted and openly contested social marginalisation and ill-treatment, while also providing Māori youth with a platform to reclaim a sense of status and purpose (Andrae et al., 2017b). The solidification of their presence in both urban and in rural communities with higher Māori populations contributed to the intergenerational nature of gang affiliation (Newbold & Taonui, 2020; Parliamentary Service, 2022).

[16]Gilbert (2010, p. 352) argues that term ethnic gangs or ethnic minority gang is problematic because these gangs do not exclude Pākehā members and "most had a small percentage of them". Similarly, outlaw motorbike gangs even those with white supremacist tendencies allowed Māori members to join.

As participation in gangs steadily increased, so did the occurrences of inter-gang conflict and other socially objectionable gang-related atrocities such as serious violence, rape, and murder (Gilbert, 2013). The frequent violent confrontation between rival gangs was closely and often distortedly sensationalised by the media (Kelsey & Young, 1982).

In an effort to prevent gangs from becoming a nationwide issue and to curb their activity, the government in the 1970s implemented stricter policies and enforcement measures. Despite these efforts, the policies failed to deliver the expected results as gang membership continued to rise, and violent conflict between gangs persisted (Gilbert, 2013; Ministry of Social Development-Te Manatū Whakahiato Ora, 2008). This indicated that suppression-focused polices did not adequately address the underlying social conditions driving the rise in gang involvement. Moreover, coupled with the media's distorted coverage these policies further alienated gangs from conventional society, deepening the divide between the gangs and the wider community, and reinforcing their outsider status (Kelsey & Young, 1982).

It was not until the Moerewa gang riot, during which several police and firefighter officers were injured, that the government shifted its approach by acknowledging "that gangs were a social problem requiring specific social redress" (Gilbert, 2010, p. 350). This led to the establishment of the 1981 Committee of the Gangs with the primary task to examine the social conditions which generate gangs and to report on the efficacy of existing policies and enforcement measures targeting gangs. The Report of the Committee, or the Comber Report, aligns with the previous section that discusses social factors fuelling gang socialisation namely substandard housing, unemployment, cultural and social estrangement, education failure, and family breakdown (Comber, 1981).

In light of the Report's findings, the government turned from solely implementing restrictive policies to initiating targeted social interventions like the Community Education Initiative Scheme and Project Employment Programme (Gilbert, 2013). Despite the

expectations that the government subsidy provided to the gangs to engage in these initiatives would curb gangs' involvement in criminal activities, attract active members out of the gang, and, more importantly, deter youth from joining, the initiatives failed to achieve their intended objectives. Consequently, impoverished Māori and Pasifika youth were attracted to the gangs, which contributed to the rapid and substantial growth of gang membership rates.

Additionally, the subsidy also altered the gangs' focus, which became primarily profit driven (Eggleston, 2009). In 1987, when the government funding for employment initiatives ceased, gangs turned to illegal activities such as illicit drug dealing to make money. In the 1990s, the criminal elements of gangs became more pronounced (Ministry of Social Development-Te Manatū Whakahiato Ora, 2006). Gangs grew increasingly organised as they established overseas networks, made peace with long-time rivals, and went further underground to evade Police attention and the scrutiny of conventional society (Gilbert, 2013).

However, gangs' involvement in the illicit drug market did not go unnoticed and "to some extent sealed their own fate" (Radak, 2016, p. 16). Addiction to drugs, imprisonment, and a general disinterest amongst youth in joining an aging gang scene decimated membership rate (Gilbert, 2010, 2013). This lull in attracting new members only lasted until the early 2000s, when new, typically overseas gangs[17] appeared in ANZ.

Similarly to the arrival of the Hells Angels in the 1950s, these new gangs altered the local gang landscape by bringing with them extensive connections to sophisticated global networks, facilitating lucrative drug trade operations, leveraging social media to reach wider audiences, demonstrating greater levels of ruthlessness, and sporting a more polished image (Brown et al., 2023). This not only rekindled the appeal of the gang life, leading to the earlier noted steady rise in membership, but also triggered a resurgence in inter-gang violence as

[17]The new gangs arriving on ANZ's shores were the result of Australian imposing its Migration Act (1958), Section 501(1) in 2014 (Australian Government, 1958). This policy allows Australia to deport non-citizens who may not fit the character test (Williams, 2024). Consequently, members of Australian gangs deported to ANZ are colloquially referred to as 501s.

competition over territory and criminal enterprises intensified (Breetzke et al., 2021). In response, the current government circled back to the use of a series of suppressive policies aimed at reducing gang-related activity and restoring public order (New Zealand Government-Te Kāwanatanga o Aotearoa, 2024; New Zealand Police-Ngā Pirihimana o Aotearoa, n.d.).

By that time, several former criminal gang members and some criminal gangs or gang chapters had adopted a more prosocial outlook which promoted healthy family life, denounced the use of methamphetamine, and began to work with social and religious sector agencies to improve their members' lifestyle (Dunn, 2013). This transformation captured my attention and as outlined earlier, marked the beginning of my journey to look further into its intricacies. While the details of this exploration unfold in the subsequent chapters, the following section provides a brief overview of the thesis structure and the chapters' content.

Overview of the Thesis Structure and Organisation

This thesis comprises nine chapters. The first four chapters namely Introduction, Literature Review, Theory, and Methodology and Methods establish the contextual and theoretical foundations, outline the research design, and situate the study within the field of social work. The remaining five such as the three findings (Journey Into Gang Member Identity, Gang Disengagement Process, and The Continuum of Criminal Gang Desistance), followed by the Discussion, and the Conclusion and Recommendations chapters together articulate the study's original and significant contribution to the body of knowledge on social work and criminal gang desistance. References and appendices namely the Participant Consent Form, Participants Information Sheet, Evidence of Consultation, Ethics Approval, Advertisement, Request Letter, Recruitment Map, Interview Guide, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, and Draft Questionnaire for Future Quantitative Research Project as supporting documentation are included to demonstrate the study's academic rigour and ethical adherence.

Chapter One introduced the research objectives by highlighting the gap in the literature and with the focus on my researcher position, outlined how the research questions have emerged. The chapter then elaborated on the social factors that are considered to propel individuals to enter gangs, the evolution of gang definitions, and identified the most suitable definition to describe the sociocultural background of ANZ gangs. Prior to providing an overview of the thesis structure, the chapter situated the study in ANZ context by reviewing important historical events that shaped the development and rise of the gangs and contributed to Māori overrepresentation in gangs.

The first section of Chapter Two introduces the parameters applied to review the literature pertaining to gang exit, gang desistance, and stigma management strategies. Following the presentation of the definitions and terms used to explain gang desistance and the classification and methods of criminal gang disengagement, the chapter reviews studies which cast light on social stigma definition and production. In its final part, the chapter combines its two main concerns, desistance and stigma management, to highlight the gaps in the literature.

Chapter Three outlines the study's theoretical framework, which rests on symbolic interactionism as the focal theoretical background. Emerging from this theoretical tradition labelling, role exit, and cognitive transformation theories are introduced as the study's conceptual framework and analytical lens. Lastly, the study's analytical framework, Interpretive Phenomenology Analysis, is presented through its major theoretical traditions, namely phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography.

Chapter Four is divided into two main components. The first part maps out the study's methodological concepts, the qualitative and interpretive phenomenological approach. The second part explains how the chosen methodology and the ethical considerations guide the design of the sample universe, participant criteria, sample size, interview structure, and interview guide. This is followed by the description of the project's practical elements such as

participant recruitment, data collection, transcription, handling of the research documents and transcripts, and the interpretive phenomenology data analysis processes. The chapter also introduces the participants' characteristics and presents a table outlining their demographic information. Lastly, it offers guidance on how the interpretive figures visually represent the data analysis and illustrate participants' gang-centric life phases and their corresponding categories and themes across Findings Chapters Five, Six, and Seven.

In Chapter Five, participants' narratives are organised into categories that demonstrate how childhood experiences influenced their idolisation of the gang lifestyle, propelled them to enter a gang, and initiated a life phase centred around establishing a gang member identity.

Chapter Six presents participants' adverse experiences or altered personal circumstances which induced vacillation about remaining in the gang and oscillation between the gang and conventional life. The chapter also highlights critical events that participants identified as turning points as these experiences accelerated their exit process from the gang. The chapter concludes by addressing the immediate physical and psychological consequences of leaving; an aspect of the gang exit process that serves as a transitional link to the next chapter.

As a conclusion to findings, Chapter Seven introduces the concept of desistance maintenance continuum within which the focus shifts to the experiences of ongoing challenges following the event of gang exit. The chapter by following a chronological order, provides an insight into participants' difficulties in the initial phases of gang desistance, (re)connection with various conventional social networks, and application of stigma management methods during the desistance maintenance. An explanation of participants' cues that reflected their cognitive shift towards adopting a desister identity is also offered.

Chapter Eight overviews the original research aims and questions in light of the research findings, then it discusses the findings' consistencies and inconsistencies with the local and international literature and addresses the four research questions. Prior to outlining the

theoretical framework's contributions, the chapter first addresses the practical implications of the findings by highlighting their relevance to current gang prevention and intervention initiatives and their applicability within the transformative social work principles.

Chapter Nine concludes the thesis with the review of the research aims and questions, theoretical foundation, and research methods. In relation to the key learnings the chapter discusses the study's original contribution to the social work and criminal gang desistance knowledge. By highlighting the research limitations and the findings' implications, the chapter proposes recommendations for future study designs to advance the understanding of gang desistance, as well as interventions and policies concerned with gang prevention, supports for gang disengagement and gang desistance maintenance. Finally, the chapter offers my concluding thoughts and reflections on my personal journey in completing this PhD project.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

After outlining the literature search parameters and focus, the chapter proceeds to discuss prominent concepts of crime and gang desistance, and stigma offered in classical and contemporary literature. Following the introduction of commonly used definitions and terms related to crime and gang desistance, an overview of theoretical perspectives elucidates how maturational or social structural factors, or the combination of both, trigger crime cessation and gang exit. This is then followed by a review of the studies concerned with the process of gang disengagement, the typologies of gang desisters, and the concept of desistance maintenance.

Close attention to these concepts and transformed criminal gang members' bibliographies imply that managing social stigma is inevitable during desistance. As a result of the dearth of systemic examination of this phenomenon in the gang desistance-centric literature, the chapter turns to reviewing other fields of scholarship offering extensive knowledge on social stigma production and management strategies. By bringing together these two distinct bodies of literature, the final section highlights the thesis' contribution to addressing "the virtual absence of research examining stigma among former gang members" (Lee & Bubolz, 2020, p. 65) and emphasises the need for further exploration of criminal gang desistance maintenance in the context of stigma management.

Literature Search Parameters and Focus of Review

After a comprehensive citation and hand search, and a thorough check on electronic databases like Scopus and Google Scholar and Massey University's Discover search tool, the following search terms were used: gang (and relating notions such as gang members, mob, cartel, organised crime, criminal organisation, motorcycle club), gang desistance (and the family of terms like gang exit, leave, desistance, redemption, transformation, identity), stigma

(and the relevant concepts namely alienation, discrimination, stereotypes, prejudice, social isolation, socially isolated, marginalised, disenfranchised, outsider, social exclusion, socially excluded, stigma coping, stigma management, stigma methods/strategies/styles). This search yielded a large body of literature addressing crime and gang desistance on the one hand and stigma production and its coping strategies on the other. Additionally, the review brought to light that these topics are rarely addressed together.

By reviewing these scholarly contributions to the fields of desistance and stigma, the chapter presents a comprehensive account on the commonly used concepts and terms. The key themes and positions frame gang exit and desistance as complex and non-linear processes, in which identity change is facilitated by the dynamic interplay between critical life events (e.g., employment, family, and community ties), internal shifts in self-concept, and external recognition of reform. These perspectives also inform that gang disengagement can be arranged along a spectrum, ranging from full withdrawal to partial or symbolic exits, unfolding in gradual or passive exit methods.

Post-exit residual gang linkages tend to linger due to the persistence of emotional ties to fellow members and reintegration challenges such as social stigma, exclusion, and limited opportunities to build prosocial relationships. The recognition of such barriers should increasingly necessitate the criminal and gang literature to consider how individuals develop essential competencies like coping skills and self-efficacy for sustaining desistance. Successful identity transformation and social reintegration, central to long-term desistance maintenance, are closely linked to the adoption of adaptive responses. These perspectives appear to align with both desistance and stigma focused literature.

Insights from stigma management literature suggest that stigma is a pervasive and socially constructed mechanism, functioning as a protective measure to perceived outgroup threat and maintained through dominant power structures. While in the literature, stigma is

widely recognised as a key driver of gang entry, its role in hindering gang exit and desistance has received limited scholarly attention. However, a review of reformed gang members' autobiographies highlights striking parallels between the coping strategies of ex-gang members and other stigmatised individuals. These anecdotal accounts indicate that desisters often employ a range of strategies such as secrecy, selective disclosure, and, eventually, open acknowledgment of one's past as a means of leveraging social isolation and achieving constructive reintegration in conventional society.

Given that the review of the literature revealed a notable gap in the empirical knowledge on how former gang members manage social stigma during (re)integration, the following sections, after addressing the key concepts of crime, gang desistance, and stigma, propose that the process pertaining to criminal gang desistance sustenance may, in fact, be contingent on the individual's skills to manage social stigma after leaving the gang.

Towards the Understanding of Criminal Gang Desistance

This section introduces key definitions and theories relevant to crime and gang desistance, then proceeds to review literature concerned with developmental and structural factors, as well as their integration, that foster desistance. This is followed by a discussion of studies that examine the process of gang disengagement and the classification of former gang membership status. The section concludes with the review of literature elaborating on desistance maintenance.

Definitions and Terms Used to Explain Desistance

While the concept of crime and gang desistance was outlined as early as 1940 in Glueck and Glueck's seminal work, this phase of the criminal career did not gain much scholarly attention until the 1990s (Weaver, 2019). After extensive debate on the conceptualisation of desistance, it is now widely accepted that crime and gang desistance is best understood as a

process of change rather than an endpoint, as it is the product of a gradual shift in self-identification[18] (Maruna & Farrall, 2004). This de-identification process unfolds in interlocking, yet distinguishable phases, comprising changes in self-perception, the social recognition of these changes, and a sense of belonging to prosocial institutions (like family, peers, religious groups, employment, and education) (Maruna, 2001; McNeill, 2014).

The following subsections bring attention to key debates that were influential in advancing the theoretical understanding of desistance by incorporating the now commonly accepted factors into its definition. These scholarly discussions produced several terms describing the desistance stimulating factors' psychological and sociological characteristics. LeBel et al. (2008) distinguish between two broad categories: sociological or sociogenetic factors that describe external and structural influences such as marriage, employment, parenthood, and links to other social institutions. Whereas the subjective factors refer to internal transformations like ontogenic development[19], cognitive shifts, and identity-based changes that reflect "the way individuals experience, understand, interpret and make sense of the world around them" (LeBel et al., 2008, p. 133). In this study, I also use this term differentiation to reflect the nature of each source of change, while recognising that these factors are intimately interconnected.

Desistance in the View of Maturation Changes

The Gluecks' (1940) classical maturation reform theory suggests that as the brain naturally matures, individuals grow out of participating in crime and abruptly end their criminal careers, (Weaver, 2019). Based on this reasoning, delinquency is viewed as a phase in the life

[18]This refers to a gradual process, in which an individual may identify as a criminal gang member at one point in time but no longer see themselves as such at a later point.

[19]Originally used in developmental psychology to describe the brain maturation process (Dannefer, 1984, 1987; Laub & Sampson, 1993), the term has been adopted in desistance theories to account for the positive correlation between neurological maturation and reduction or cessation of engagement in criminal and gang-related activities.

trajectory, typically beginning in early adolescence, peaking in young adulthood, and significantly declining or ceasing around the age of 30 or 40 (Blumstein & Cohen, 1987).

Developed from this perspective, the age-crime curve theoretical explanation also ascribes desistance to biological changes. It argues that maturation enhances mental capacity, increasing ability to reappraise the costs and benefits of delinquency and make more rational and conscious decisions to change, especially when the criminal lifestyle becomes increasingly unprofitable and dissatisfying (Farrington, 1986; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009; Steffensmeier & Harer, 1987). In this light, criminal or gang involvement is seen as universally age related, because, within any historical period, regardless of the sociocultural context, maturation naturally curbs criminal participation (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983).

In the 1980s and early 1990s, age became an appealing quality to operationalise desistance[20]. However, other scholars like Laub and Sampson (1993) and Maruna (1997, 1999) raised concerns about the age-graded classifications to adequately describe the pathway to transformation. As Maruna (1999, pp. 2-3) notes, "age indexes a range of different variables, including biological changes, social and normative transitions, and life experiences, [but] in itself is not an explanation for change". Consequently, crime and gang desistance research became concerned with other potential influences, such as social structural factors and their role in shaping identity-based transformations.

Social and Structural Implications of Desistance

Unsurprisingly, the ontogenic approach was increasingly criticised for neglecting sociocultural, situational, and structural influences, thereby divorcing "the individual from the context within which these developmental changes occur" (Weaver, 2019, p. 645). In response

[20]For example, if certain desistance characteristics such as the absence of arrest for three or five years following release from prison (Cusson & Pinsonneault, 1986; Shover & Thompson, 1992; Uggen & Kruttschnitt, 1998), or being offence-free over the age of 31 for at least 10 years (Mischkowitz, 1994) were met, individuals were putatively considered desisters.

to this limitation, desistance scholars began to explore the role of social and structural events in bringing about desistance. Although Matza's (1964) drift theory laid the foundation for this sociological approach, by highlighting the negative influence of diminished (pro)social bonds on increased delinquency, it was Laub and Sampson's (1993) informal social control theory that generated substantial scholarly attention to the sociogenetic explanation of desistance.

Drawing on the Gluecks' (1940) longitudinal study and Elder et al.'s (1991) concept of turning points, Laub and Sampson (1993, p. 315) propose that external factors such as marriage, a "steady job", or parenthood act like critical events or turning points because they prompt a transition out of long-term patterns of delinquency via the formation of ties with prosocial reference groups. In this context, these indirect factors' influential property lies within the prosocial bond development, that "emerge as by-products of role relationships established for other purposes and are components of role reciprocities" (Kornhauser, 1978, p. 24).

By placing the emphasis on social bonds, Laub and Sampson (1993) argue that critical events indirectly enable informal social control by moderating and eventually severing a delinquent individual's attachment to criminal behaviour. Laub and Sampson (1993) further contend that not only the quality, but also the quantity of social bonds is essential for facilitating successful transitions. To extend their theory, they draw on Coleman's (1988) social capital definition, which describes social networks and personal connections as sources of benefits and resources. Considering this, informal social control includes individuals' investment in interpersonal relationships and institutional linkages, which generate "a knowledge and sense of obligations, expectations, trustworthiness, information channels, norms, and sanctions" (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997, p. 229). The development of these connections, in turn, directly bolster personal change and sustain role transition.

Over the decades, several empirical studies have explored the transitional influence of critical life events. For example, by reversing Cressey's (1955) differential association theory[21], Warr (1998) states that romantic relationships or marriage can present as an opportunity to adopt prosocial behaviours, inevitably producing lasting desistance from crime and gang life. In a similar fashion, Moloney et al. (2009), Leibrich (1993), and Schinkel (2019) find that becoming a parent can function as a turning point, catalysing individuals' transition out of a delinquent and gang-oriented lifestyle. Meanwhile, Laub and Sampson (1993) and Cunningham (2016, 2017) convincingly argue that the crucial ingredient for desistance is employment, because it "is one of the most deeply embedded markers of adult success and social acceptance and is strongly related to individuals' physical, mental and social health" (Yahner et al., 2016, p. 3).

Workman (2014) bridges social control theories with Tikanga Māori approaches such as the whakahoki mauri concept, in relation to desistance. He argues, this approach, which centres around restoring balance in the community, aligns closely with the original pākehā meaning of rehabilitation, rather than the contemporary ANZ approach to rehabilitation that may focus on punishment, stigmatisation, and marginalisation. The whakahoki mauri approach seeks to provide alternative ways of restoring the mana of individuals and their communities through whanaungatanga or informal social relations and utu or rectification and reciprocal response play crucial roles in supporting meaningful desistance (Tremblay, 2003).

Others like Giordano et al. (2008) and Maruna et al. (2006) consider the role of religious groups in supporting desistance. While Bottoms and Shapland (2011), Bottoms et al. (2004), and Flynn (2010), on the other hand, highlighting the importance of spatial factors, like community environments where individuals' everyday activities and interactions occur. Both Goffman (1963) and Meisenhelder (1977) hint that these settings matter because "the places

[21]An explanation of differential association theory is offered in Chapter One (pp. 7-8).

an individual routinely inhabits communicate some element of ‘who’ they are and ‘what’ they do [and what they strive to become]” (Farrall et al., 2014, p. 162). Consequently, a change in structural context or physical relocation can also serve as a critical life event, because moving to another area not only disrupts connections with venues and places associated with antisocial peers and activities, but can foster change by installing new priorities and routines, such as employment and new peer and familial relations (Hagan, 1997).

However, Graham and Bowling (1995) found that young female participants were more responsive to critical life events such as marriage, parenthood, and relocation, whereas these same events had little to no effect on their male counterparts’ crime and gang embedded life. Rutter (1996) ascribes such inconsistencies in sociogenetic research to the insufficient attention to participants’ diverse personal histories, traits, and demographic characteristics such as gender, age, and race. In similar vein, Uggen and Kruttschnitt (1998) question the effective operationalisation of social control theories for their overly deterministic assumptions and failure to consider human agency. They argue, rather than passively governed by these external forces, individuals make conscious decision of how, when and to what extent they engage and respond to them.

Klaus (2022) also rejects the notion that desistance can solely be observed through critical life events regarded as turning points. In his view, rather than isolated occurrences generating an endpoint to desistance, defining events are part of a complex life trajectory alongside myriads of seemingly less noteworthy moments. These minor experiences often coalesce and collectively become instrumental in laying the foundation for a major “ground-breaking event” (Klaus, 2022, p. 222). In this sense, critical life events do not represent a single transformative moment but reflect a gradually developed psychological receptivity to social stimuli, or preparedness for the transformation process (Carlsson, 2012).

Theoretical Integration or Unveiling a More Complete Process of Desistance

Indeed, by the late 1990s, the realisation that the desistance process could not be fully explained without the integration of internal and external factors shifted scholarly focus toward exploring how ontogenetic and sociogenic approaches interact to motivate identity transformation (Maruna, 1999). Essentially, these interactionist theories emphasise that desistance is an "outcome of an individual seeking to alter their socio-structural context, and in so doing acquiring new behaviors and new pro-social roles, or vice versa, variously resulting in associated shifts in the individual's personal and social identity" (Weaver, 2019, p. 648). Put simply, in their specific social context, new social roles (or critical events) by altering identities anchor individuals' desistance.

In parallel with Klaus' (2022) earlier point of view, these theories posit that critical life events are merely supplementary components within an intricate transitional process, wherein subjective responses to social events are key to initiate change (LeBel et al., 2008). In line with this, Giordano et al.'s (2002) cognitive transformation[22] theory blends symbolic interactionism[23] with social control theory. It posits that desistance begins with motivation and readiness to change and unfolds through four distinctive stages: openness to change, exposure and response to "hooks of change" (Giordano et al., 2002, p. 992), envisaging a conventional replacement self, and redefined attitudes towards delinquent behaviour. More specifically, when individuals imbue certain events with meaning, interpreting them as hooks for change, such events become critical and act as turning points.

Another interactionist approach is Maruna and Farrall's (2004) secondary desistance theory, which technically reverses Lemert's (1951, 1972) secondary deviance concept (a subject further addressed in Chapter Three, p. 66). As Lemert (1951, p. 76) notes in his

[22]The cognitive transformation theory and its stages are extensively described in Chapter Three (p. 77).

[23]Symbolic interactionism has been chosen as the central theoretical perspective for this project. Its broader tenets are discussed in Chapter Three (p. 58).

observation, repeated and severe societal reactions to one's delinquency causes cognitive shift as "existing roles will be disrupted and that reorganisation based upon a new role or roles will occur." Lemert's recognition is equally applicable to desistance, as the concepts of primary and secondary desistance depict a bilateral process of exit and maintenance that is two "sharply polarized or even categorical phases" (Lemert, 1948, as cited in Maruna & Farrall, 2004, p. 3).

In this process, primary desistance refers to the temporary cessation of offending during one's criminal career, reflecting what persistently offending individuals are (or are not) doing at a behavioural level. On the other hand, secondary desistance "shifts the focus towards [one's] being or becoming" or the internalisation of change (Graham & McNeill, 2018, p. 435). The movement from doing to being (or becoming) is communicated through a reflective and self-conscious break from previous patterns of offending and the assumption of new prosocial roles incorporating conventional values (such as friendships, compassion for others, and generative actions[24]). As a result, sustained desistance from crime or gang becomes identifiable through "the achievement of a meaningful and credible new self" (Healy, 2014, p. 874; Healy, 2016, p. 191). This perspective is discussed further in the upcoming Gang Desistance Maintenance (pp. 40-42) section and revisited throughout this and subsequent chapters.

While Maruna and Farrall (2004) acknowledge the role of social reactions in shaping a desister identity, they offer limited explanation of how social processes reinforce desistance. Addressing this gap, by drawing on the central tenets of symbolic interactionism, McNeill (2014, 2016) introduces the concept of tertiary desistance. This perspective posits that behavioural changes are greatly influenced and sustained by a sense of belonging and recognition of transformation in a prosocial reference group, which in turn help to scaffold the earlier desistance phases (McNeill, 2016). Since behaviour and identity shifts are typically

[24]Erikson (1977) introduced the concept of generative actions or generativity, to describe behaviours characterised by engagement in prosocial activities producing worthy outcomes for the next generation. Such activities include guidance, care, and nurture of others who are in need.

reinforced through prosocial labelling or what Braithwaite and Mugford (1994, p. 140) term as "reintegration ceremonies" (more on this on p. 54), they cannot be considered independent from this broader social reinsertion process.

Nugent and Schinkel (2016) argue that the terms primary, secondary, and tertiary desistance imply a chronological sequence. To eliminate linearity and to outline that desistance occurs concurrently in "the world outside, within ourselves and in relation to others" (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016, p. 570), they propose renaming these phases as act, identity, and relational desistance. To further elaborate on relational desistance, the authors distinguish between micro (family and immediate environment), meso (Police, rival gangs, employers or education providers), and macro (the world at large[25]) tiers of conventional society and argue that social bonds and capital across these tiers add further reinforcement for identity transformation.

In summary, prominent theoretical and definitional approaches emphasise that the transition from criminal to prosocial roles is a gradual process primarily shaped by the interplay between external structural influences producing (critical) life events (such as family, employment, and community ties), identity-based changes or cognitive shifts, and social recognition. These theoretical perspectives directly inform the classification of disengagement strategies and methods in relation to the degree to which emotional ties and continued involvement in gang-related criminal activity persist.

The Classification and Methods of Criminal Gang Disengagement

By drawing on these diverse theoretical explanations of desistance and employing Ebaugh's (1988) role exit theory, Decker et al. (2014) outline a general pattern that pertains to the gang disengagement process[26] (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). Their mixed-methods research,

[25]Nugent and Schinkel (2016) remain largely silent about who is included by the term world at large. Therefore, in this study, the world at large is understood in its literal sense, referring to society in its broadest form.

[26]Gang disengagement based on Ebaugh's role exit theory are discussed in Chapter Three (p. 73).

alongside subsequent studies by Berger et al. (2017) and Dziewanski (2020) consistently identifies four distinctive patterns: first doubts about continued gang membership, exploration of alternative roles, receptivity to critical life events or turning points (or the event of criminal gang exit), and finally, post-exit validation that ameliorates the "ongoing contest between gang life and conformity" (Decker et al., 2014, p. 280). This last stage is crucial in strengthening commitment to desistance and stabilising identity transformation.

Classification of Membership Status

Nonetheless, the social, emotional, and financial ties to the gang remain important, as they can prompt relapses into former roles complicating the classification of membership status. Recognising this fluidity between roles, Maruna and Farrall (2004, p. 5) argue that the stages of secondary desistance model are non-linear, because individuals may encounter "proto-secondary desistance"[27], when confronted with setbacks. Moreover, Vigil (1988) observes that holding onto gang membership often persists because leaving the gang entails rejecting one's friends and severing ties to a financial source. Consequently, Decker and Lauristen (2002) state that determining who may qualify as a desister may raise difficulties, yet such classifications can be useful for understanding the various types of former gang membership status (Pyrooz et al., 2014; Tamatea, 2017).

Decker and Lauristen's (2002) classification of former gang membership centres around the degree of emotional ties and continued involvement in criminal activity, ranging from complete withdrawal, where former members cut all social, emotional, and financial ties with the gang, to partial disengagement, in which individuals either sustain social connections without participating in criminal gang activities, engage in crime for monetary gains without

[27]Proto-secondary desistance refers to a (significant) period during which involvement in crime or gang activity ceases, prior to any potential relapse into offending or gang participation (Poleschek & Yesberg, 2015). In crime and gang literature the concept of proto-secondary desistance is more commonly referred to as a "zig-zag path" (Carlsson, 2012, p. 4) of desistance because the term reflects how the individuals drift back and forth between the conventional and criminal worlds (Carlsson, 2012; Maruna, 2001; Matza, 1964).

maintaining an emotional bond, or remain emotionally, socially, and economically connected to the gang despite claiming to have left.

Building on this typology, Pyrooz and Decker (2011, p. 423) propose that only those who fit the first category can be considered true desisters, while those in the second category are typically referred to as "Original Gangsters (OGs) or *veteranos* [emphasis in original], in particular those who have aged through gang life and may be older." Pyrooz and Decker (2011) further argue that those who belong to the third and fourth categories should still be classified as gang members, with the primary difference lying in the nature of their social relations to the other members. While these typologies highlight the complexities of categorising the extent of disassociation and gang membership status, they also illustrate that gang disengagement is not a uniform process, varying according to the different methods used to exit.

Methods of Disengagement

Both classifications, besides illustrating the difficulties revolving around discerning one's level of gang (dis)engagement, give rise to questions of how the severance of social and economic ties impede the gang exit process. Research concerned with the consequences of exiting, bring attention to the gang's violent/active reactions like physical assaults on exiters, which may serve to prolong membership status (Decker & Lauristen, 2002; Dunbar, 2018; Tamatea, 2015; Vigil, 1988). Fleisher and Decker (2001, p. 69) graphically describe this hostile exit ritual as the "blood out rule". There is also evidence to suggest that verbal threats of violence and scepticism about the ability to manage desistance are equally likely responses to leaving the gang (Bjørgo, 2002; Dunbar, 2018).

In contrast, though, research studies more commonly find that leaving the gang occurs via non-violent, passive, or uneventful methods, including walking away from the gang and abruptly knifing off[28] associations or gradually transitioning into arenas where social

[28]The use of this term in the criminal and desistance literature is discussed in detail in Chapter One, (p. 9).

expectations incrementally increase the desire to engage in prosocial roles like becoming a parent, a partner, or an employee (Bjørgo, 2002; Bolden, 2020; Maruna & Roy, 2007; Sweeten et al., 2013). This coincides with the view (Berger et al., 2017; Decker et al., 2014; Klaus, 2022) that desistance should not be assigned to isolated events but rather understood as a part of complex life trajectory shaped by a variety of experiences and occurrences "replete with pushes and pulls to conformity and back to the gang" (Pyrooz et al., 2014, p. 508). This perspective also supports the position that gang exit process is typically gradual and as Carlsson (2012) characterises follows a zig-zag path (or phases of proto-secondary desistance) between the conventional and gang worlds. As a result, it offers a more accurate explanation than accounts (Laub & Sampson, 1993; Sampson & Laub, 1996) that portray gang exit as a straightforward or sudden singular event, typically equating it with the gang desistance process.

Gang Desistance Maintenance

Another important angle that casts light on the prolonged process of gang de-identification and de-embeddedness is the social reaction to one's involvement in gang and criminality. The social stigma associated with gang membership often manifests as judgement, rejection, and prejudice, which in turn restrict opportunities to access conventional forms of social and economic resources and negatively impact on the process of disengagement and post-exit reintegration (Dziewanski, 2020; Hagan, 1997). Maruna (2001) similarly argues that while the immediate ramifications of delinquency, such as fear of imprisonment, loss of family, or health complications might directly trigger temporary cessation of crime and gang involvement, the long-term maintenance of desistance requires a distinct set of skills that is different from what initiates the behavioural change. He, therefore, calls for a shift in focus on understanding the skills and competencies necessary to abstain from relapsing into criminal and gang activities or maintain change, especially under considerable criminogenic pressures.

Built on this perspective, Nugent and Schinkel's (2016) longitudinal study demonstrates that cutting ties with former peer bands may support desistance, yet the absence of new reference groups, unmet conventional aspirations, and the fear of being stigmatised may cause prolonged feelings of isolation. Other studies, including those by Aresti et al. (2010), Berger et al. (2017) Bolden (2020), Healy (2014), and Maruna (2001) while acknowledge that maintenance of desistance can be hindered by the shortage of marketable skills and social capital, and the exposure to widespread social stigma, they emphasise positive attitude, self-efficacy[29], and open acknowledgement of one's past are traits that can help the achievement of prosocial goals and successful reintegration.

What remains underexplored in these studies, however, is the intricately evolving process of desistance maintenance, an aspect which, although acknowledged, is left insufficiently investigated in Berger at al.'s (2017) study. This complexity surrounding desistance sustenance is more vividly presented in biographic accounts of transformed offenders and gang members like Bolden (2020), Honeywell (2023), Isaac and Haami (2007), Jones (2002), and Weaver (2008). These life stories show that maintaining desistance in the early stages, is typically fraught with difficulty due to limited prosocial ties and a sense of ongoing social exclusion in the wider social web. Consequently, such challenges prompt the use of reactive stigma coping styles. Yet, over time, increased social validation and recognition strengthen commitment to conventional norms, making desistance easier to sustain and enabling the adoption of more proactive stigma management methods. This raises the question of how desisters navigate and overcome the fear of stigmatisation and social alienation, and how they incorporate more positive and resilient strategies to mitigate social stigma targeting their past identities?

[29]Healy (2014, p. 876) posits that proactive approach (or approach coping style) and management of "adverse situations…through problem-focused (e.g. planning, problem solving, and seeking external assistance) or emotional-focused (e.g. finding meaning in difficult experiences and turning to religion) strategies" are closely related to desisters' self-efficacy and indicate enhanced cognitive and behavioural efforts to achieve better outcomes.

By overviewing relevant literature, this section identified that gang disengagement is an often complex and non-linear process, influenced by emotional, social, and financial ties. Social relations and gang involvement may persist in varying degrees blurring the lines between membership statuses and the extent of disengagement. Typologies developed by Decker and Lauristen (2002) and Pyrooz and Decker (2011) highlight these nuances by differentiating between full withdrawal and partial or symbolic exits. The method of gang exit, which can occur abruptly or through gradual life transitions is instrumental in communicating the level of gang disengagement and membership status. The desistance maintenance process is also conditioned by societal challenges such as social exclusion and limited prosocial relationships, which often necessitate desisters to employ coping methods and self-efficacy to successfully navigate obstacles, achieve identity transformation, and long-term reintegration.

Autobiographical accounts of reformed gang members suggest that the gradual adoption of less reactive stigma coping strategies mirror other stigmatised persons' stigma management styles used to counter social exclusion, a sense of isolation, and barriers to accomplish desired conventional goals. These strategies may, in fact, reflect the skills Maruna (2001) refers to when he urges a closer exploration of competencies required to maintain criminal and gang desistance. The progression of desisters' personal transformation, therefore, may also be observed in their movement toward more adaptive responses to stigma. However, as a result of lacking sufficient empirical and epistemological explanation of these intertwined processes, the following section turns to overview the prominent conceptualisations of stigma definitions, production, and management styles, offered in related body of scholarship.

Social Stigma

Autobiographies of transformed gang members highlight, that exposure to social stigma critically influences the way gang desistance unfolds and is maintained. However, literature

centred around gang desistance seldom addresses what social stigma is, how it is produced and how individuals respond to it. To address this gap, the following section begins with a systemic review of literature on the evolution of social stigma definitions. It then proceeds to overview literature that explains the sources, components, and implications of social stigma.

Social Stigma Definition and Production

Evolutionary theorists like Kurzban and Leary (2001) suggest that stigma is a pervasive phenomenon, found across all societies because it originates from a psychological mechanism evolved to support adaptation and provide solutions to problems associated with unpleasant or unwelcome social interactions. Its primary function is to establish boundaries and to differentiate individuals, who are perceived to possess undesired and socially devalued characteristics. While historically, stigma signalled visible markers that had to be worn by the undesirable and the incorrigible, this practice has largely faded in contemporary societies (Falk, 2001)[30]. In modern context, stigma is deduced metaphorically, referring to an invisible mark that denotes social exclusion and diminished social status (Smith et al., 2016).

In his classic work, Goffman (1963, p. 3) describes social stigma as "an attribute that is deeply discrediting", because it links the bearer to undesirable stereotypes that reduce him or her "from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one." He identifies three primary conditions, which are likely to attract social stigmatisation and discrimination: abominations of the body (physical deformities and incurable illnesses), tribal stigma (determined by race, nation, or religion, often transmitted through generation), and blemishes of character (traits regarded as defective or socially deviant such as homosexuality, mental illness, addiction, and criminality) (LeBel, 2008).

[30]However, to a certain degree, in contemporary societies conspicuous identification of stigmatised status is still practiced in various forms like the prisoners' uniforms or gang tattoos (although the latter represents internalised stigma, which then manifests in self-inflicted visible branding).

Goffman's seminal work continues to shape successive investigation of stigma and its production. For instance, Crocker et al. (1998) and Jones et al. (1984) argue that stigma originates from social identity as discredited characteristics reflects one's social value and subsequently, position in a particular society. In contrast, Leary and Schreindorfer (1998) view stigma as the consequence of interpersonal disconnections. In this context, stigma is a product of personal relationships, where those with close ties to the labelled individuals may see them as less dangerous or undeserving of social exclusion compared to those with little or no contact with the stigmatised (Angermeyer et al., 2004; Corrigan et al., 2001; Winnick & Bodkin, 2008).

Extending these definitions Link and Phelan (2001) propose that the stigma arises from five interrelated social components: identifying and labelling human differences, attaching these labels to negative stereotypes, categorising labelled individuals into distinct groups, reinforcing their alienation and status loss through social exclusion, and enabling these processes to unfold through political power structures. Together, these components result in marginalisation, encompassing the conceptually distinct but stigma related processes such as the stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination[31] (Frost, 2011; Major & O'Brien, 2005).

By dissecting the social mechanism producing stigma, Link and Phelan (2001) shift the focus from personal traits to broader structural dimensions as the origin of stigmatisation[32]. This idea echoes Becker's (1963, p. 9) observation that "*social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance* [emphasis in original], and by applying

[31]Corrigan et al. (2003) and Frost (2011) distinguish between three integral components of stigma namely stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination. Stereotypes are commonly held generalisations of certain characteristics and attributes of people or social groups. While most members of a society are aware of stereotypes, they do not necessarily believe in their true nature. On the other hand, prejudice occurs when the stereotypes are accepted to hold valid meaning and individuals are approached and treated in a way that corresponds with the meaning of the stereotype. While stereotypes and prejudice are more nuanced and psychological, discrimination is a visible and at times tangible form of differentiation, which can be observed in structural inequality that is constructed by laws, policies and other social institutions aimed at limiting those who perceived to possess discreditable characteristics.

[32]This standpoint stems from Link et al.'s (1989) modified labelling theory, which is discussed in detail in Chapter Three (pp. 68-70).

these rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders". On these grounds, Herek (2009, p. 57) argues that "as with other forms of stigma, sexual stigma is expressed through society's institutions" which generates a "cultural belief system through which homosexuality is denigrated, discredited, and socially constructed as invalid relative to heterosexuality". Further studies like Andrae et al.'s (2017b), Frost's (2011), and Corrigan et al.'s (2003) also recognise how laws, policies, (and religion) can construct only negative portrayal of the stigmatised groups. While social institutions play a key role in shaping the meaning of stigma, its far-reaching and widespread dissemination and public conceptualisation and acceptance of who has and what it means to be having a stigmatised status is largely driven by various media platforms such as television, newspaper, or social media (more recently) (Jones et al., 1984; Scheff, 1966).

Conversely, other scholars caution against viewing social institutions as sole sources of social stigma (Falk, 2001; Link et al., 1989; Sanders, 2017). While Falk (2001) acknowledges that macro social structures are instrumental in the stigmatisation of existential conditions like homosexuality, mental illness, and race without merit as these attributes are often beyond individuals' control, he argues that prisoners, homeless, violent mentally ill, and addicts may actively contribute to achieving stigmatised status through their conduct (LeBel, 2008).

Fundamentally, Falk's (2001) achieved stigma concept shares the assumption with Goffman's (1963) notion of character blemishes, as both attribute stigma to conduct that may pose risk to others. Supporting this, several studies find that schizophrenics, criminals, and substance users are viewed more dangerous than those whose conditions are beyond their control (LeBel, 2012; Rasinski et al., 2005; Uggen et al., 2004; Weiner et al., 1988). Unsurprisingly, individuals deemed responsible for achieving stigma face harsher public reactions including avoidance, segregation, and restricted access to rights and opportunities, which ultimately result in social exclusion and a loss of full citizenship (Corrigan et al., 2003).

Undoubtedly, while these reactive measures serve to protect the ingroup members from those viewed as dangerous and untrustworthy and preserve group cohesion, they can inflict harmful effects on the outgroup members (Corrigan et al., 2003; Falk, 2001; Frost, 2011; Kurzban & Leary, 2001; LeBel, 2008). Research shows that ongoing stigmatisation and social exclusion can destabilise identity security, strain coping resources, and invoke psychological responses like low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety, which in turn may cause physiological issues like high blood pressure and cardiovascular complications (Harris et al., 2006; Major & O'Brien, 2005; Miller & Kaiser, 2001; Smart Richman et al., 2010). In response, labelled individuals may withdraw or disengage from the dominant social group that constructs social stigma, as a way to minimise further psychological distress (Major & O'Brien, 2005).

Social and psychological disengagement from conventional society causes gravitation to an alternative group that offer a sense of belonging, recognition, and purpose (Frable et al., 1998; Frost, 2011; Jones et al., 1984). In turn, social relations and validation strengthens outgroup identification and cohesion, and safeguards members' interests (Allport, 1954; Ellemers et al., 2002). Seeking refuge in an alternative community, therefore, functions as a coping mechanism that buffers against psychological and physical stressors associated with stigmatisation (Brotherton & Barrios, 2004; Frost, 2011; Tamatea, 2015, 2017).

This section by overviewing stigma-focused literature, concludes that stigma is a pervasive, socially constructed phenomenon born out of psychological mechanisms designed to protect ingroup members from those perceived as sick, untrustworthy, or alien. Foundational theorists like Becker (1963) and Link and Phelan (2001) further emphasise that stigma arises not only from individual characteristics but also from broader systems of power that define the category of outsiders and distribute this stance through media.

Individuals carrying achieved stigma because of their socially objectionable behaviours frequently encounter harsher public treatment. In response, stigmatised individuals withdraw

from mainstream society and seek belonging in alternative communities that offer social validation and help mitigate the psychological and physiological impacts of exclusion. As discussed in Chapter One (pp. 6-11), the literature on gang socialisation (Eggleston, 1997; Faleolo, 2014; Gilbert, 2010; Lemert, 1951, 1972; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Melde & Esbensen, 2011; Moffitt, 1993) identifies achieved stigma as a contributor to gang entry. However, limited attention has been paid to how perception of, and exposure to social stigma may frustrate the gang exit and desistance maintenance processes. In an attempt to explore potential correlations, the following section revisits the desistance literature and highlights links between criminal gang desisters' stigma responses and coping skills of other stigmatised individuals.

The Link Between Criminal Gang Desistance and Social Stigma Management

This final section integrates literature on gang desistance with research on other stigmatised persons' management of social stigma, to illuminate desisting gang members' potential stigma management styles. First, the section revisits studies highlighting structural factors that either reinforce or obstruct desistance maintenance, interpreting these concepts through the lens of social stigma production. Next, it reviews literature on how former convicts respond to stigma and drawing on these insights, discusses how desisting gang members might navigate similar challenges. Finally, by reviewing reformed criminal gang members' life stories through Siegel et al.'s (1998) framework of coping strategies, the section posits that stigma management methods are vital to understanding the maintenance of criminal gang desistance.

Criminal Gang Desistance Revisited

As established in the previous chapter, social exclusion is one of the primary drivers behind individuals' entry into gangs, where the ensuing effects of the gang's social suction further disrupts members' peer and familial relations (Moule et al., 2013; van Gemert & Fleisher, 2005). Increased alienation from the conventional society shapes self-perception and

leads to an advanced identification with an alternative social group, namely the gang. This results in the gang role identity becoming dominant and emerging across various reference groups and circumstances. Consequently, members are perceived by society through the lens of their gang affiliation. As Decker et al. (2014, p. 276) observe, "[t]here is, however, no "certificate" for those who have left their gang, or any other criminal group", meaning that former members often continue to be treated as if they were still active affiliates even long after exiting the gang.

Underscoring Decker et al.'s (2014) statement, research consistently shows internal transformation initiating gang disengagement is insufficient on its own to produce role exit satisfaction (Meisenhelder, 1977, 1982; Nugent & Schinkel, 2016). Without social validation and recognition of change, one may remain isolated, and the transformation process can stall or become emotionally painful, potentially causing reconsideration or even reengagement with criminal gang activities (Lee & Bubolz, 2020; Nugent & Schinkel, 2016). Maruna (2001) states to leverage the potential negative outcomes of criminal or gang exit and to find purpose in prosocial roles like family or employment is vital to making desistance meaningful. Yet, the question remains: if one exits a gang but continues to be seen and treated by the public as an active member, what coping skills are required to mitigate the effects of achieved stigma, turn public perception away from labels like dangerous, untrustworthy, and incorrigible, and regain full citizenship in the broader society?

Crocker at al. (1998, p. 504) argue to fully grasp the personal struggle of stigmatised individuals, research must refocus from examining social factors to exploring "how [the stigmatised] understand and interpret their stigmatisation, how they cope with it, and how it affects their psychological well-being, cognitive functioning, and interactions with non-stigmatised individuals." In line with this view, multiple studies have since examined former offenders' stigma response styles (Harding, 2003; Smith et al., 2022; Uggen et al., 2004).

Coping Skills

For instance, Healy's (2014) in-depth qualitative investigation analyses the coping mechanisms ex-offenders use to navigate identity transition and overcome barriers to change. Drawing on research by Solberg Nes and Segerstrom (2006) and Amodeo et al. (1992), Healy differentiates between the avoidance and approach-oriented stress response styles. Her findings suggest that those ex-offenders who rely on avoidance strategies such as denial, withdrawal, and decline support, are more likely to fluctuate between criminal and conventional lifestyles. Whereas, those who actively approach and confront challenges and seek external assistance to overcome these barriers are better positioned to maintain desistance (Maruna, 2001).

As noted earlier, stress is a natural psychological response to stigma; however, Healy's (2014) study does not clarify which structural factors can invoke stigma related stress and how these factors condition coping style selection amongst desisting criminals. To investigate how spatial factors influence stigma responses, Winnick and Bodkin (2008) examine former prisoners' reactions to achieved stigma across various social contexts. They find that anticipated stigma can drive ex-cons to conceal their past in settings like employment, education, and housing, where exclusion is perceived as highly likely. In contrast, inclusive environments "such as among family, friends, or one's faith community" (Winnick & Bodkin, 2008, p. 302), can motivate openness and prompt disclosure of one's former status.[33]

Building on Winnick and Bodkin's findings, Flores (2016, p. 23) argues that while faith-based communities tend to unconditionally accept both active and desisting gang members, encouraging recovery from gang lifestyle, they can also "segregate members from their local communities". In his view, faith-based communities can somewhat resemble gangs in controlling and limiting outgroup social connections.

[33]The authors also find that strong structural forces such as post-release conditions can motivate transparency, yet secrecy about status remains prevalent in circumstances when disclosure is not required.

However, unlike gangs, religious settings tend to promote a sense of prosocial direction and purpose, support conformity to socially accepted norms, and aid in attaining higher education qualifications. Maruna et al. (2006) conclude that resocialisation into religious groups fundamentally supports the adoption of a prosocial and generative way of life, which help restore self-esteem and self-perception, two crucial factors for maintaining satisfying desistance (Johnson, 2004; Maruna, 2001). Based on these arguments, spirituality and religious beliefs, therefore, directly contribute to the processes of personal transformations and adoption of a prosocial identity by encouraging reflection on past behaviours, strengthening prosocial relationships, and supporting the development of alternative life goals.

Although Healy's (2014) and Winnick and Bodkin's (2008) studies offer insights into how ex-offenders manage stigma-stressors, Bullock and Tilley (2008) and Lee and Bubolz (2020) argue that non-gang member criminals should not be equated with active gang members despite the observable overlap in their labelled status. They (Bullock & Tilley, 2008; Lee & Bubolz, 2020) emphasise that gang membership is inexorably associated with criminal and antisocial behaviours[34], such as drug dealings, violence, and extortion, driving law enforcement officials to view active members as more dangerous and resistent to intervention than non-gang affiliated criminals (Klein, 2004; Tamatea, 2018). Consequently, publicly available NGL is set up to control and monitor active membership rates, which further exacerbate stigma and discrimination in the wider social settings (Howell & Griffiths, 2019). Based on this, Lee and Bubolz (2020) assert that the gang label can attract more durable and damaging stigma than the criminal behaviour itself.

To support this position, Lee and Bubolz (2020), drawing on Rosen and Cruz's (2018) study, argue that former gang members are often exposed to prolonged stigma and discrimination from the Police and the public, because of their appearance (gang-related

[34]As a result, most gang definitions include criminality as a defining characteristic of membership.

tattoos, attire, and speech) or criminal history. Both studies, consistent with Berger et al. (2017), Decker et al. (2014), and Nugent and Schinkel (2016), emphasise the importance of post-exit validation and imply that without such validation maintaining desistance and meaningful change becomes challenging.

While these studies highlight the stigma associated with both active and former gang membership, they do not explore how social and subjective processes influence former criminal gang members' selection of coping methods. Thus, the final section, by drawing on relevant stigma literature, explores the potential strategies former criminal gang members utilise to attenuate the debilitating impacts of social stigma and create a sense of purpose and a meaningful life after leaving the gang.

Potential Stigma Management Strategies

Due to the paucity of empirical or epistemological studies, insights into how former gang members manage social stigma (along with its components of stereotype, prejudice, and discrimination) primarily derived from autobiographical accounts such as Bolden (2020), Honeywell (2023), Isaac and Haami (2007), and Weaver (2008). These life stories also suggest that ex-criminal gang members' stigma response styles evolve over time, progressing from defensive strategies to more approach-oriented methods as desistance progresses.

How stigamaitsed individuals gradually move towards incorporating less defensive stigma management methods is seldom addressed, even in stigma-centric studies (LeBel, 2008). To fill this gap, Siegel et al. (1998, p. 7), in their study of HIV/AIDS infected gay men, conceptualise the range of coping strategies "along a continuum based on the degree to which individuals accepted or rejected the values, norm or assumptions that underpin the stigma." Instead of using the terms avoidant and approach methods, Siegel and his colleagues describe response styles as reactive or proactive. Notwithstanding this variation in terminology across the literature, most stigma management strategies fall into two overarching categories the

negative/reactive or the positive/proactive (Amodeo et al., 1992). In line with this trend, this study adopts these two primary terms.

Strategies like concealment (or secrecy) and avoidance (or withdrawal) fall within the reactive category. As noted by Goffman (1963), Lee and Craft (2002), and Siegel et al. (1998), these defensive methods can temporarily soften the negative impacts of social stigma (but also accepting the prevalent social norms that construct stigma) and help achieve short-term goals such as obtaining employment or housing. However, individuals relying on reactive strategies may excessively worry about the possibility of being exposed, which could jeopardise their accomplished goals and result in public humiliation (Frable et al., 1990). This constant anxiety can cause depression, intrusive thoughts, and difficulties in forming meaningful social connections. Ultimately, it can reinforce the perception of isolation and perpetuated dependence on reactive coping mechanisms (Link et al., 1991; Miller & Major, 2000).

Strategies such as gradual and selective disclosure are placed in the intermediate category. According to Siegel et al. (1998), these strategies are transitional because they lack the full capacity to challenge the dominant stigmatising societal conditions, but they can act as stepping stones toward the adoption of more proactive strategies. Despite their potential, these coping skills are, therefore, largely reactive, as disclosure only occurs under specific circumstances and within a small circle of trusted people those whom Goffman (1963, p. 19) describes as “the own and the wise”. Schneider and Conrad (1980, p. 42) define this cautious and incremental disclosure as a strategy “to test the possible effects of coming out”, before deciding to reveal discredited attributes more broadly.

Unlike the previous two, more passive treatments of stigma, proactive responses, namely the pre-emptive disclosure[35] and the public education actively reject the sociocultural norms and power structures that construct stigma (Link et al., 1991). Pre-emptive disclosure

[35]Schneider and Conrad (1980, p. 40) call this method “preventive telling”.

by allowing individuals to control personal information, eliminates the risk of involuntary exposure and confronts sociocultural beliefs that discreditable attributes are shameful and ought to be concealed. Public education, meanwhile, represents the most overt effort to dismantle and redefine societal perceptions of stigma, by offering a positive and convincing image of the stigmatised as a competent and credible individual who is able to fulfil socially valued roles (Darling, 2003; Gill, 1997; Goffman, 1963; Sayce, 1999). Consequently, the adoption of proactive strategies often occurs later in new settings, once individuals have "either achieved greater self-acceptance … or felt that they had adequate support to risk more public exposure of their discreditable trait" (Siegel et al., 1998, pp. 20-21).

Adopting the role of a professional-ex or a wounded healer[36] is one of the socially valued identities, which requires individuals not only to overtly acknowledge their discredited traits, but also to draw on their lived experiences in their professional settings (Brown, 1991b; LeBel, 2008; Maruna, 2001). By reaching back to help those whose progression is less far along in the recovery process, the professional-ex besides aiding others' transformation, facilitates their own desistance and personal recovery (Brown, 1991a; LeBel, 2007; Maruna, 2001; Weaver & Weaver, 2013).

Cressey's (1965, p. 56) theory of retroflexive transformation, rooted in symbolic interactionism, posits that beyond lived experiences, language, particularly, "the verbalizations appropriate to the behaviour [they are] trying to create" is the primary vehicle to influence behaviour change amongst persisting criminals. However, transformation is most effective for the criminal-turned-reformers when they "are induced to join with noncriminals for the purpose of changing other criminals. A group in which criminal A joins with some noncriminals to change criminal B is probably most effective in changing criminal A, not B" (Cressey, 1955, p. 119), as criminal A strives to discard stigmatising labels and convince the public of their

[36]A detailed explanation of this term is offered in the Glossary.

transformation through consistent communicative actions, such as demonstrating commitment to conventional norms even amid adversity.

Being recognised in a law-abiding group and trusted with credible social roles is perceived as a form of social certification of one's transformed identity. According to Lofland (1969) and Meisenhelder (1982, p. 142), this post-exit certification by "some recognised members of the conventional community," such as agents of law enforcement, is a symbolic, yet vital component of the change process. Such public validation act as symbolic reintegration ceremonies that by announcing and confirming desisters' transformation improves their self-perception and commitment to a new identity (Braithwaite & Mugford, 1994). Moreover, Shih (2004, p. 181) posits that individuals may continue to draw support even from those groups that stigma associated with, enabling them to "reject negative public images … strive to maintain social status and to function at a high level".

As reflected in the transformed gang members' life stories, self-efficacy and perseverance even in the face of setbacks, are the key traits in accomplishing satisfying desistance. As Maruna and Farrall (2004, p. 5) posit, "desistance might best be construed as the study of continuity rather than change … [which] focuses on the dynamic interplay between persons and the social environment". Their statement emphasises how social interactions produce conditions that enable long-term persistence in various behaviours. Indeed, several research publications point out that post role exit (such as offender or prisoner) validation across different tiers of social environment is just as important for maintaining desistance as it is for enabling the adoption of proactive stigma management strategies. In line with this view, Siegel et al. (1998) suggest that strategies can help soften the impact of life's inevitable frustrations. This gives rise to the study's overarching questions: do ANZ former criminal gang members apply stigma management strategies similar to those employed by other stigmatised persons to gain social certification, achieve conventional goals, and establish a meaningful life?

If so: what stigma management methods do they use to achieve post-exit certification and does the passage of time support the adoption of proactive coping styles?

Conclusion

From setting the research parameters to reviewing literature on crime and criminal gang desistance, social stigma production, and stigma management methods, it became clear that there is a paucity of empirical research exploring how stigma interferes with maintenance of gang desistance. The review began by discussing the various desistance definitions and examining the maturational, social structural, and their combined impacts on desistance. It was established that desistance is a distinct phase, which can be distinguished from the initial disengagement process. The review also revealed that while the criminal gang disengagement process typically follows a generic pattern, the gang exit methods are not uniform, either occurring abruptly or through gradual transitions. Persistent social relations and residual gang involvement prolong this process and blur the lines between membership statuses, complicating their classification.

Due to limited research on coping skills essential for maintaining gang desistance, the review extended into other bodies of scholarship that investigates and offers insight into the construction and management of social stigma. This comparative exploration casts light on the close link between stigma and maintenance of criminal gang desistance. Former criminal gang members' life stories support the notion that the skills required to sustain desistance differ from those that initiate behavioural change, because the focus, after leaving the gang, shifts toward navigating the effects of achieved stigma.

To expand insight into the transition within the course of desistance maintenance, and to explore how stigma frustrate it, the next chapter turns to the study's theoretical framework. It begins with the introduction of symbolic interactionism, followed by a discussion of the three

conceptual theories namely cognitive transformation, role exit, and labelling. Building on these theoretical foundations, the chapter introduces the analytical framework of this research, which is informed by the key aspects of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis.

Chapter Three

Theoretical Framework

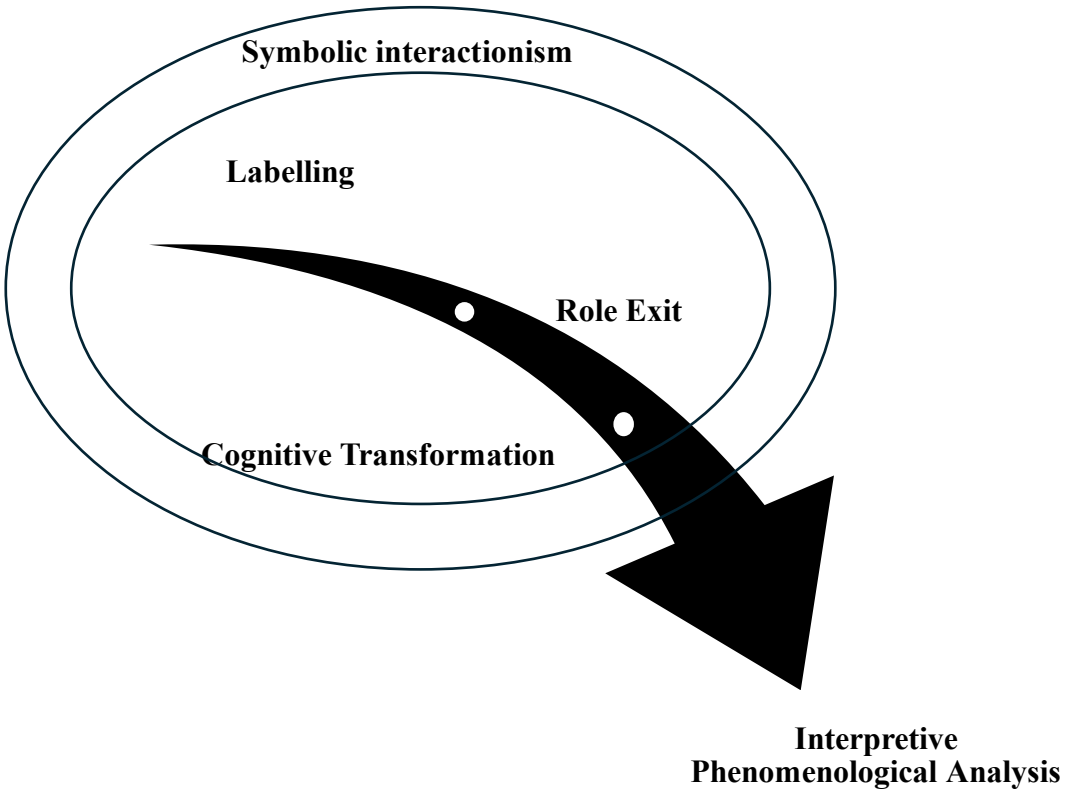
This chapter presents the study's theoretical framework beginning with an overview of the broader theoretical tenets of symbolic interactionism including the concepts of reference group, the self, and the salient identity. Symbolic interactionism serves as the study's focal theoretical background from which labelling, role exit, and cognitive transformation theories emerge. Together, these theories form the conceptual framework and provide the theoretical lens for interpretive phenomenology, which is used as the study's analytical framework. Figure 3. 1 (p. 58) depicts how the chosen theoretical dimensions construct the theoretical framework.

The first conceptual theory introduces classical explanations of labelling with a particular focus on Link et al.'s (1989) modified labelling model, which helps explain how social interactions construct salient gang identities. The next two theories, the role exit and the cognitive transformation, detail the social, structural and cognitive shifts that eventually give rise to the replacement of the gang identity with a conventional one. Following the introduction of conceptual theories, their relationship is outlined, and their connection is illustrated in Figure 3. 2 (p. 83). This framework serves as the study's analytical lens for exploring gang desistance.

This chapter ends with the discussion of the study's analytical framework, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis via its three theoretical pillars: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. The conclusion explains how the conceptual and analytical frameworks interact, influence each other, and ultimately shape the study's approach to data analysis.

Figure 3. 1

The Theoretical Framework



Symbolic Interactionism

In this first section a generic explanation of symbolic interactionism is provided. This is followed by the presentation of its development, the elucidation of its key concepts such as the reference group, the self, and the salient identity, which grounds symbolic interactionism as the theoretical cornerstone for this thesis. This section's conclusion outlines how symbolic interactionism shapes the understanding of gang and gang membership development and underpins the conceptual theories.

The Development of Symbolic Interactionism

In the early nineteenth century, by drawing on the precepts of phenomenology and American pragmatism, Cooley, Mead, and other forerunners of symbolic interactionism began to canvass an alternative theoretical explanation to counterbalance the then-prevalent positivist approach (Denzin, 1995). By rejecting the views that society is a static moral order, these early theorists proposed that change is inherent in society's organisation because of social interactions. Through interactions individuals create subjective meanings of events or objects and communicate their perception of meanings with the assistance of shared symbols such as language or non-verbal communication methods (Matsueda, 2014; Mead, 1934).

Consequently, social interaction is a process through which objects and events are explained that individuals come into contact with. An object can be anything that individuals can refer to, and assign meaning to (Blumer, 1986). However, the meaning of an object is not necessarily stable, as it can acquire a new meaning relevant to a particular situation (Baumeister, 1994; Garfinkel, 1956). Yet characteristically objects can be organised into three categories, namely physical (such as car, house, clothes), social (like father, friend, student), and abstract (for example ideas, events, and experiences). These characteristics determine how objects are regarded, acted towards, and communicated (Blumer, 1986).

Blumer (1937), who coined the term symbolic interactionism[37], posits that meaning is not an intrinsic feature of objects but emerges through the interaction between individuals. Symbolic interactionism further suggests that the diverse, simultaneously existing perspectives of meaning can be negotiated and organised through ongoing social interactions and communication (Matsueda & Heimer, 1997; Turner, 1978). These communication lines create and shape the development of shared meanings, values, norms, and practices, which can lead to the crystallisation of distinct social groups or subcultures within a given society

[37]Before Blumer (1986) introduced the term symbolic interaction, it was referred to as social interaction theory.

(Tannenbaum, 1938; Thrasher, 1927). Consequently, symbolic interactionism views society that is constituted of myriads of subcultures (Matsueda, 2014).

However, among these social groups exists a dominant group. The dominant culture like other groups is "socially constituted in interactions" (Matsueda & Heimer, 1997, p. 168) but it intersects subcultures and demarcates conventionally acceptable norms, beliefs, practices, and behaviour patterns for successful integration into society at large. In contrast, subcultures represent particular social groups organised around alternative set of viewpoints, concerns, and ways concerns are approached and solved (Goffman, 1963; Tyler, 2018). Essentially, dominant and subcultures are both a collection of individuals who share common values, norms, and practices and are bound together by mutual experiences and interests (Matsueda, 2014).

Reference Groups

Social groups range from casual networks to highly structured organisations (Merton, 1957). These groups may become and serve as points of reference when individuals form strong connections with the members, who come to be regarded as significant others (Hagan & Palloni, 1990; Matsueda, 1992). The strong sense of belonging to these groups such as family and peer bands, then shapes decision-making, socially acceptable behaviour, and social identity formulation (Kavish et al., 2016). Consequently, social groups that become reference groups help members see themselves from the group's perspective and align their conduct to role expectations (Dewey, 1922). Participation in these reference groups, urges members to occupy the same role as they initially assumed and demonstrate behaviour relevant to this particular role (Goffman, 1963). The consistency in role adherence gives rise to behaviour continuity, which in turn reinforces and stabilises the identity associated with the role. Hence members of the same or similar reference group display similarities in behaviour (Kanter, 1968).

However, even if an individual remains a long-standing member of a social group, roles may shift over time. While roles in reference groups are influential, they are not always

permanent fixtures in individuals' lives (Glueck & Glueck, 1940). As people mature, they are expected to adapt to new environments, which bring on new experiences. Thus, as socialisation expands from the intimate family to peers and then to wider adult social arenas, individuals' reference group membership inevitably changes (Lemert, 1951; Warr, 1998). For instance, as individuals enter adulthood, they transition from adolescent roles, and may take on new roles such as husband or wife, parent, employee, and other social roles, which are typically associated with adult reference groups (Sampson & Laub, 1995; Sampson & Laub, 2017). All roles (regardless which age stage they are connected to) and especially entering a new role in a reference group require social interactions or socialisation with its members (Mead, 1913).

Although through socialisation role expectations are learnt, construction of the role's meaning is highly germane to subjective interpretations (Matsueda & Heimer, 1997). This internal process requires individuals to reflect and interact within themselves to make sense of the object, in this instance the role and group membership, and develop related understandings (Blumer, 1981). Dewey (1922) views this interpretative process as a moral imaginative rehearsal, which precedes the delivery of an overt action or response to this object. This important observation highlights that considering consequences is a conscious reflection that can only be performed through the self (Mead, 1913; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). The self, thus, becomes the critical locus because through it individuals make sense of and, according to the interpretation, respond to their social world (Testa, 2017).

The Self

Symbolic interactionism also views the self as an object, which is incepted by one's role-taking in reference groups and is constructed through social interactions with significant others' appraisals (Ellemers et al., 2002). In this perspective, individuals' participation and engagement in multiple social groups give rise to a multidimensional role identification (Matsueda, 2014; Stryker, 1980). Over the decades, various symbolic interactionist views have been developed

to elucidate how the assumption of a role in a reference group communicates one's self and how the self signals one's position in the immediate and wider social structure.

For instance, perhaps the most notable symbolic interactionist concept of self is offered in Cooley's (1902) looking glass theory[38]. He posits that the construction of self is primarily determined by how others react to the individual's conduct. In turn, these reactions and opinions are internalised and then reflected in the individual's future behaviour (Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1979). Building on Cooley's concept, Mead (1934) points out the process in which self is constructed, involves three interlocking courses. First, the way others view the individual (others' appraisal). Second, the way the individual interprets the other's appraisals (reflection of appraisal), and finally, the way the individual perceives themselves in the light of the appraisals (self-appraisals). Consequently, Mead views the self as a product of social interactions within which meaning is attached to the self and subsequently emerges as a social object (Lemert, 1951; Winnick & Bodkin, 2008). Its construction, like other objects, is therefore, the product of shared meanings and understandings prevalent to a reference group, which in turn influences how individuals regard themselves and what roles they assume/occupy in a set of circumstances (Matsueda, 1992; Matsueda & Heimer, 1997).

More recently, Matsueda (2014, p. 14) points out that "[t]he self arises through role-taking, the process of taking the role of the other, that is, viewing one's self from the perspective of the other and controlling one's behavior accordingly." Or to put it simply, self as a role-identity is the subjective interpretation of significant others' appraisals, which fundamentally direct one's behaviour. Mead (1934) adds that role identities contribute to the development of self-concept, through which individuals see themselves and believe others see them in a role. This leads to identities being invoked in circumstances most relevant to the role. Consequently,

[38]Although, the looking glass theory is often attributed to George Herbert Mead, the term was coined by Charles Cooley (1902), which was later further developed by Mead.

individuals' multidimensional designations or role identities revolve around in a hierarchical system corresponding with the circumstance (Stryker, 1968). For example, in a professional setting, an individual's employee role might take on the most prominent place in the identity hierarchy, while in a family gathering, the same individual's role as a parent or sibling might become more prominent. In summary, the myriads of role identities cumulatively constitute the self, but identities' importance shifts and they surface in accordance with the relevant social interactions and context (Kitsuse, 1968; Lemert, 1972; Stets & Tsushima, 2001; Turner, 1978).

Formulation of Salient Identity

Stryker (1968) posits that positive emotional, social, and material returns from participating in a reference group increase the saliency of role identification. The more one invests in a particular reference group, the more influential the associated identity becomes that corresponds with the role linked to the reference group. Goffman (1959) adds that while certain role-related benefits may appear as secondary or peripheral at first, constant engagement in the role can render these benefits central to the role's core functions.

From a similar perspective, Becker (1960, p. 36) posits that assuming roles in social organisations generates side bets such as status and respect, emotional and social ties, and material benefits, which are "originally extraneous" to the role but accumulate over time. As the investments in a reference group deepen, the cost of losing accrued side bets is perceived to be great. This produces what Kanter (1968, p. 500) terms "continuance commitment", which in turn cements members' identification with the group.

If role-taking is recurrent and commitment is built up, the corresponding identity may become automatic and habitualised over time (Matsueda & Heimer, 1997). This increases the likelihood that the identity is invoked across a broader range of situations, taking precedence over other identities (Stryker, 1968). For instance, an individual who is pursuing a professional career may find their professional identity emerging or dominating in contexts such as family

gathering, where it would normally be irrelevant. As salient identity conditions interpretation and response to the meanings of objects and events, it "becomes important in the prediction of behaviour" (Stryker, 1968, p. 560) and communication of one's social standing, reference group commitments, and moral career inspirations (Goffman, 1961; Phelan & Hunt, 1998).

Gang and Gang Membership: The Symbolic Interactionist View

From perspectives of symbolic interactionism, the formulation of gangs and gang member identity can be clearly elucidated. Gangs like other social groups are products of social interactions and crystallise along a line of communications that occur between the gang and the dominant and other subcultures. Because gangs are organised around a set of viewpoints, concerns, and alternative approaches to solve and manage concerns, they can become reference groups to members. As the gang's social suction effect exerts its influence, members' vested interest in the gang increases. This enhances membership continuity and identification with the gang. When the gang member identity takes precedence over other identities, and it arises in broader range and seemingly distinct set of situations it reaches saliency.

Within broader cultural context where interactions between members of various, including the dominant social groups occur, meaning is created and attached to the gang. In other words, there is a set of expectations of how gangs operate and as members' dominant gang identity communicates moral career aspirations it helps other gangs and the public interpret how they conduct themselves in social interactions. These interpretations also scaffold the development of salient gang identity.

From this perspective, interactions not only guide reference groups' alignment with each other but also shape individuals' behaviour and its adjustment to other reference groups. However, the dominant social group does not align with subcultures, rather, it intersects them by defining and demarcating behaviour patterns that can either enhance or hinder one's chances at attaining success in the conventional society. When a reference group, like a gang is deemed

objectionable, the dominant culture's affective reactions and labels can substantially limit its members' ability to assume conventional roles. This, in turn, reinforces members' commitment to the gang. The following section, drawing on labelling theory, discusses how labels are socially constructed, applied, and what consequences they may have on the labelled.

Labelling Theory

This section explores the classical theoretical explanations of labelling theory (LT) and discusses how social reactions and the application of labels generate reinforced identification with delinquent or stigmatised roles. A more structured presentation in the form of Link et al.'s (1989) modified labelling model is offered to elaborate on the inception and continued reinforcement of gang identification. Finally, LT's relationship with the other two conceptual theories is addressed.

Classical Explanations

LT is considered one of the earliest sociological theories attempting to elucidate the social causes of deviant behaviour (Winnick & Bodkin, 2008). In its most elemental form LT posits that society's reactions, manifesting in labels, modify behaviour patterns. This is evident in Mead's (1918) seminal work, in which he refers to the idea that while the intent of labelling is to deter future delinquent behaviour, the public's hostile response to delinquency instead of reducing, it preserves delinquent tendencies and a criminal class (Becker, 1963; Goffman, 1961; Kitsuse & Cicourel, 1963; Lemert, 1951; Scheff, 1966). Building on Mead's (1918) early observation of the effects of labelling and Thrasher's (1927) work on gang formation, Tannenbaum (1938, pp. 19-20) introduces the concept of the "dramatization of the "evil"", which suggests that continued social responses induce a cognitive process through which the person internalise his imposed labels until he "becomes the thing he is described as being."

Drawing on these theoretical premises, Lemert (1951) distinguishes between two phases inherent in the labelling process. The first phase refers to primary deviation which is concerned with individuals' actions (such as petty crime) arising from situational contexts. According to Lemert (1972, p. 80), although most people, often with "no prior awareness", violate certain laws during their lifetimes, they are not seen as criminals by the rest of the society because their actions are merely ephemeral. If their behaviour is promptly corrected, social reactions to the act has no lasting effects on individuals' identity structure (Sampson & Laub, 1997).

However, when delinquency becomes greater in number and severity, social reactions intensify in an effort to curb the undesired behaviour through various forms of punishment like retribution, labelling or stigmatisation, and segregation (Bernburg, 2009; Erikson, 1962). As the controlling arms of the dominant (or conventional) society like the Police, the Corrections, and the Justice system repeatedly subject individuals to what Garfinkel (1956) describes as degradation ceremonies[39], a transition from a non-deviant to a deviant social position begins.

In Lemert's (1951, 1972) view these reactions ultimately reinforce a deviant role identity, because changes in social context such as one's altered social role, social standing, and relationships, cumulatively set into motion an interpretation process through which labels are internalised. This in turn, reshapes one's self-perception and aligns future behaviour with the meaning ascribed by the label. When individuals' lives and identities are "organized around the facts of deviance" (Lemert, 1972, p. 63), rather than conventional activities, and they become central in managing (through defence, attack, and adaptation) unfavourable social reactions, the individual enters the phase of secondary deviation (Stryker, 1980; Stryker & Craft, 1982).

[39]Status degradation ceremony refers to "any communicative work between persons, whereby the public identity of an actor is transformed into something looked on as lower in the local scheme of social types" (Garfinkel, 1956, p. 420). Such ceremonies enact the ritual destruction of identities and the construction of a discredited other. In practice, institutions like the Police, courts, and registries like NGL generate label that foster public exclusion (for example limiting employment opportunities) and reinforce deviant identity.

In line with this view, Becker (1963) argues that deviance is socially constructed because it is the dominant social group who creates and enforces rules across society. Individuals or social bands who break these rules are labelled decadent and, as a result, are identified as outsiders. Outsiders tend to face scrutiny and are subjected to segregation from the society's conventional realms. However, limitations are not only imposed out of fear of being cheated on in social exchanges, but they also serve to distinguish second class citizens who are typically consist of migrants, colonised native peoples, and other discredited individuals (Kurzban & Leary, 2001; Major & O'Brien, 2005). Indeed, Becker (1963) proposes that because racial minorities are considered more likely to violate laws and policies, they tend to be subjected to disproportionate policing than members of the dominant culture (Paternoster & Iovanni, 1989).

Critical, indigenous, and pacific criminology perspectives, including perspectives such as whakakohi mauri and Fa'a Sāmoa underpin Becker's (1963) outsider concept. These perspectives recognise that dominant power structures within society often marginalise individuals and communities who possess less social, political, and economic power. As Faleolo and Forsyth (2024, p. iii) highlight "after centuries of colonisation, the contemporary position of indigenous and first nation peoples in the wealthy settler colonial states of Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand, Canada, and the United States is one of profound social, economic, and political marginalisation." The effects of labelling and stigmatisation is reflected in the disproportionate representation of indigenous and first nation peoples within criminal justice systems, as well as in wider social and demographic inequalities like high rates of perpetration and victimisation of family violence, substance misuse, and lower educational achievements (Cunneen & Tauri, 2016; Cunneen & Tauri, 2019).

Hence, labelling is considered instrumental for maintaining the differentiation of the powerless and the disadvantaged and, subsequently the fragmentation of the society (Schur, 1971). In parallel with this view, Erikson (1962) concludes that the negative interactions with

the conventional society irreversibly determines the labelled individual's outsider status, rendering access to conventional opportunities permanently problematic (Braithwaite, 1989).

While these classical explanations of the labelling process have played a key role in encouraging tolerance of diversity and justifying treatment improvement for the mentally ill, the disabled, and the delinquent, the view that one's discredited characteristics are a simple matter of social stimuli has attracted considerable amount of criticism (Braithwaite, 1989). Critics of labellists claimed that exaggerated focus on the influence of negative social interactions blurs how individuals' personal characteristics and emotions stimulate behaviour (Paternoster & Iovanni, 1989; Sampson & Laub, 1997). As Akers (1968, p. 463) put it:

> One sometimes gets the impression from reading this literature that people go about minding their own business, and then - "wham" - bad society comes along and slaps them with a stigmatized label. Forced into the role of deviant the individual has little choice but to be deviant.

Despite characterising the LT's basic tenet as a stock caricature, Akers (1968) acknowledges that one's behaviour is indeed governed by social interactions taking place in the immediate and broader social arena. In line with this observation, other critics like Wellford (1975) and Tittle (1975) note that if the incoherence in the LT is modified, it could significantly strengthen the theory's potential to explain the way social reactions and labels collectively incept and continue to produce delinquent or deviant behaviours.

The Modified Labelling Theory

To revitalise this theoretical stance, Link et al. (1989), drawing on Scheff's (1966) labelling model, developed a modified version of LT (Paternoster & Iovanni, 1989). They argue that role identities, such as that of the mentally ill, are products of socialisation. In their view,

the process of labelling, together with role identity generation as an integral part of socialisation embedded in a given cultural context, unfolds in five distinctive stages.

In line with symbolic interactionism, the first stage brings attention to the way the dominant culture stereotypes what it means to be mentally ill, and through various media or communication platforms disseminates and enculturates these views[40] across society. Via socialisation both the labelled and the non-labelled "form conceptions of what it means to acquire [a delinquent] status" (Link et al., 1989, p. 402). In other words, through social interactions, individuals collectively hold an array of beliefs of a label and learn what it means and how one is treated if labels are ascribed to them.

The second stage entails how treatment or social control agencies (which are the arms of the dominant society) officially confirm one's label. With the increase of contacts with these agencies, the label is conferred and the stereotypical belief of the label becomes personally relevant (Sampson & Laub, 1997). In the third stage, the internalisation of the labels' meaning gives rise to the labelled individual's delinquent role identity formation, which in turn produces responses to societal reactions in the form of coping styles. As detailed in the previous chapter under the section of Potential Stigma Management Strategies (pp. 51-55), social reaction management styles include reactive methods (like secrecy and withdrawal methods), and proactive approaches (such as preventive telling methods).

From this, the fourth stage emerges and highlights that regardless the character of the response styles, labelling inevitably produces unfavourable consequences and disadvantages for the labelled. The implications may entail identifiable negative external (such as reduction in social networks and social status), and internal (like lowered self-esteem) changes. The fifth

[40]Parallel with Scheff's (1966) conception, Link et al. (1989) highlight that socialisation into a society is typically contingent on drawing from information sources such as media, jokes, cartoons, and any other information outlets. Consequently, media plays a critical role in influencing community members how to regard the mentally ill. Contemporary scholars similarly find that media portrayals of delinquent youth gangs tend to be replete with stereotypes, which is used to intentionally sway the public perception of gang members (Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Hu & Dittman, 2019).

stage concludes that resulting from the degraded social status and self-regard, the labelled becomes vulnerable to repeat episodes of mental illness.

Identification as a Gang Member Through the Modified Labelling Theory

This last stage shows several parallels with Lemert's (1951) concept of secondary deviance theory. Accordingly, Paternoster and Iovanni (1989) argue that the modified LT is highly suitable to elucidate the formulation of delinquency and gang membership, because, much like in the case of mental illness, the meaning of being labelled as delinquent and who qualifies for such a label are acquired during socialisation (Sutherland & Cressey, 1955). Once a label is attached, the corresponding negative social reactions such as isolation and reduction in capitals (human, social, and cultural) can motivate the individual to gravitate towards delinquent reference groups such as gangs.

In the light of the tenets of symbolic interactionism, and the findings of several gang-centric research, it is viewed that gangs are the product of social interactions, providing alternative ways to adopting and solving issues to successfully achieve status, financial gains, and social connections, that might otherwise be difficult to attain (Brotherton & Barrios, 2004; Gilbert, 2013; Klein & Maxson, 1989; Tamatea, 2015, 2017). Identification with a gang begins when it assumes the role of a reference group, thereby actively shaping members' identity through the internalisation of its norms, values, and practices.

As individuals' human, social, and cultural capital shrink and investment in criminal capital increases, gangs tighten their social grip on members' identity (Moule et al., 2013; van Gemert & Fleisher, 2005). Because the dominant culture's approach is to proscribe criminal activities, it mobilises its sources to segregate, suppress, and eradicate subcultures that promote criminal behaviour. Consequently, membership in the gang alienates members from prosocial reference groups, and the limited outside connections reduce the need to uphold other reference groups' role expectations. This leads to the gang member identity taking precedence over other

identities and emerging in seemingly irrelevant situations (Mead, 1913). When identification with a gang is salient it "becomes important in the prediction of behaviour" (Stryker, 1968, p. 560) and provides the public strategies for responding to it.

In summary, the meaning of a social label and what behaviour corresponds with the label is learnt via socialisation. Typically, society marks the labelled as an outsider, because of the fear of being cheated, violated, or disrespected in a social exchange. The frequent negative social interactions with the non-labelled, individuals internalise the meaning of the label and begin to act accordingly. Consequently, Erikson (1962) argues that labels perpetuate and reinforce role continuance, because once labels are conferred, moving out of confirmed delinquent positions becomes difficult due to the limited access to conventional opportunities and roles (Braithwaite, 1989).

Conversely, other studies suggest that it is possible to exit a deviant role and successfully reintegrate into conventional society (Berger et al., 2017; Decker et al., 2014; Dziewanski, 2020; Maruna, 2001). To better understand the process of disengagement, the following sections draw on two key theoretical frameworks: Ebaugh's (1998) role exit theory and Giordano et al.'s (2002) theory of cognitive transformation. Together, they provide insights into how external social factors and internal change processes facilitate successful transition to conventional roles.

The Theory of Role Exit

This section provides an overview of Ebaugh's (1988) role exit theory (RET), illustrating the generic social process of role detachment and transitioning. However, to introduce the theory's four stages, Decker et al.'s (2014) and Berger et al.'s (2017) investigations are selected because the authors apply this theoretical explanation to illuminate

the process of gang disengagement. Finally, Ebaugh's hangover identity concept is highlighted to show how residue of labels can continue to influence gang desisters' role development.

Theory Development

Informed by theoretical traditions like role theory (Linton, 1936; Merton, 1957), social interaction, life transition (Becker, 1963; Goffman, 1961), and anticipatory socialisation (Merton, 1957), Ebaugh argues that disengagement from a prior role involves a gradual withdrawal from its social expectations and networks. This distancing reduces obligation to enact former behaviours, which corresponds with the reference group's expectations. While exiting a former role diminishes access to its benefits and obligations, integration into a new role sets out distinct expectations and delineates behaviour patterns necessary to maintain participation and acceptance in the new reference group. By entering a new role, individuals inevitably acquire and add a new set of skills to their existing skillset.

Building on Cumming and Henry's (1961) and Blau's (1973) exploratory studies about senior citizens' role exit processes, Ebaugh (1988) extends the analysis to a broad range of role leavers' experiences (such as familial, religious, occupational, and stigmatised) concluding that role exit generically follows a patterned trajectory. This exit process can be divided into the following four stages: the emergence of doubts about role continuity (1), which naturally increases the evaluation of role related costs and rewards alongside the exploration of alternative roles (2), until the occurrence of a critical turning point, typically an external event prompts decisive action (3), which leads to the event of the actual exit and subsequently the construction of an ex-role (4).

This theoretical approach to the role transition process has been critiqued to verge on common sense explanation rather than being an adequate conceptual tool because it fails to account for and clarify strategies individuals apply to assume or forsake roles (Ellis, 1990;

Giovanni, 1989; Hunter, 1989; Wacquant, 1990). Notwithstanding the critique, the theory[41] has been extensively used for explicating the process of exit from various revered careers such as politicians (Roberts, 2019), professional athletes (Drahota & Eitzen, 1998), religious roles (Haire, 2022), and from socially discredited roles like prostitutes (Månsson & Hedin, 1999), substance users (Brown, 1991b), and far right extremists (Liguori & Spanierman, 2022; Munden, 2023). More importantly, the recognition that leaving a gang mirrors the process of transitioning out of any other roles linked to a salient identity, scholars like Decker et al. (2014) and Berger et al. (2017) adopt Ebaugh's role exit model to conceptualise the stages of gang disengagement in the absence of a tailored theoretical model.

The Four Stages of the Exit Model

By closely following Ebaugh's role exit model, Decker and his colleagues (2014) state that the earliest signs of gang disengagement are the members' growing doubts and hesitancy about role continuity. The questioning and attribution of dissatisfactory experiences to the gang life directly arise from a process of reevaluating and reinterpreting previously accepted aspects of gang life such as incarceration, victimisation of oneself or significant others, and the monotony of lifestyle (Bubolz & Simi, 2015). Although at this stage members may show limited interest in leaving their role in the gang, their growing ambivalence about the role efficacy invokes intermittently emerging contemplation of trialling alternative options.

The second stage begins when members enter into active seeking, consideration, and experimentation with roles outside the gang. As the pursuit of an alternative role becomes more purposeful, the weighing of its advantages and disadvantages takes on greater prominence. According to Decker et al. (2014), as this evaluation process crystalises and the alternative role's benefits become clearer, members increasingly exhibit behaviours that indicate

[41]Brown (1991b), Drahota and Eitzen (1998), and Berger et al. (2017) (among others) base their studies on the central tenets of Ebaugh's model but somewhat modify them to better illustrate the exit process.

dissatisfaction with the current role. These actions or what Ebaugh (1998) generally refers to as conscious cuing serves to gauge other members' reactions to the shift in role commitment.

At the time of considering the cost and rewards of the new role, members also engage in what Merton (1957) describes as anticipatory socialisation or the rehearsal of imaginary or real roles. According to Ebaugh (1988), role rehearsals are integral elements of the role exit process as they allow individuals to identify the values, norms, and practices associated with the prospective role and assess whether assumption of a new position in a corresponding reference group is worthwhile pursuing.

In the third stage, similarly to Giordano et al. (2002), Klaus (2022), and Laub and Sampson (1993), Decker et al. (2014) argue that after careful (often prolonged because of the accumulated side bets) consideration of the old and the new roles' pros and cons, "there comes a point in the role-exiting process at which the individual makes a firm and definitive decision to exit" (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 123). Typically, reaching this decision is spurred by external events. Regardless the circumstances surrounding these events, they become critical and take on a symbolic meaning in the crystallisation of one's focused reflection about the disadvantages of the undesired role and the benefits and gains of a new role (Baumeister, 1994).

Consequently, these critical events, also referred to as turning points, bring on a rapid exit or disengagement from the criminal gang lifestyle (Densley & Pyrooz, 2019). Previous studies find that gang members often describe experiences like the exposure to ongoing violence to themselves or significant others, long-term or frequent incarceration (these two factors are ascribed to the gang life), relocation, changes in family or spiritual circumstances, employment, and parenthood, as critical events which propel them to change their lifestyle (Carlsson, 2012; Maruna, 2001; Maruna et al., 2006; Roman et al., 2017; Soyer, 2013).

The last stage of the role exit model refers to the period in which individuals transition into a new social role. Ebaugh (1988) states that those who leave roles that generate a salient

identity such as nuns leaving the order or mothers giving up their parental rights may experience serious psychological consequences, such as feelings of emotional exhaustion, depression, and bouts of anxiety, which can lead to regret about decision to disengage. However, over time, as individuals settle into new roles, this emotional turmoil subside.

Successful transition out of a role, or the adoption of an ex-identity, is often signalled by individuals' self-presentation (or cuing behaviour), the quality of their relationships with former reference group members, and the social support they receive from new friendship networks (Decker & Lauristen, 2002; McNaughton, 2007; Phelan & Hunt, 1998). However, the process of establishing new roles and detaching from a previous role linked to a salient identity proves to be more difficult in the broader social context (Vigil, 1988).

Often, members of the wider society continue to see and respond to the individual in light of their former role (Turner, 1978). Additionally, having spent extended periods with the previous reference group one can be indoctrinated by the group's worldview. These factors bring about certain aspects of the previous role being carried over and incorporated in the new role identity. Ebaugh (1988, p. 173) calls this maintained identification with the previous role as "hangover identity." The residue of the former role can either be constantly present or emerge only circumstantially in situations which correspond with the previous role. The following section discusses the concept of hangover identity's influence on the construction and negotiation of an ex-role.

The Hangover Identity

While Decker et al. (2014) largely remain silent about how former gang members' hangover identity affects post-exit validation, Berger et al. (2017) highlight that desistance maintenance is engrossed in various complex and often painful social and psychological processes that are strongly related to previous role identification. Berger and his colleagues find that because of the labels attached to gang member role, after exiting, desisters may feel

cut off from prosocial institutions like prosocial family, employment, education, sport clubs, and other social groups (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016). Consequently, isolation and a carried over negative view of conventional society (remnants of gang member identity) may cause former gang members to "struggle to uphold their decision to cease criminal activities and to adopt a normative lifestyle" (Berger et al., 2017, p. 498) until meaningful and attractive activities (employment, study, or spiritual connectedness) are encountered and socially bonded to.

In summary, RET describes how individuals leave a social role, which used to play an integral part in their lives. Through RET's four stages, namely initial doubts, seeking alternatives, turning points, and creation of an ex-role, Decker et al. (2014) and Berger at al. (2017) demonstrate the gang disengagement process. Additionally, RET's last stage brings attention to what Ebaugh (1988) describes as hangover identity, a residual sense of self that helps elaborate why former gang members may, at times contemplate reengaging with the criminal gang life after leaving the gang.

However, neither Decker et al. (2014) nor Berger at al. (2017) account for how former gang members manage ongoing socially enacted stigma based on the previously held role and identity. Nor do the authors elaborate on how in the light of the lingering prior identity, former gang members manage to secure and maintain a legitimate career (especially in social and faith-based sectors). However, Brown's (1991b) investigation in the field of addiction, which also employs Ebaugh's role exit model, gives rise to the view that instead of simply discarding the delinquent self and its characteristics, desisters incorporate hangover identity into their occupational approach. This conscious use of "their emotionally lived history of shame and guilt as well as the hope and redemption secured through therapeutic transformation" (Brown, 1991b, p. 226) highlights that besides the social process of role detachment, an internal mindset shift plays just as a crucial role in moving an individual from one role to another. To explore

the way internal changes shape and assist the gang disengagement process, the following section elaborates Giordano et al.'s (2002) cognitive transformation theory.

Cognitive Transformation Theory

Giordano et al.'s (2002) cognitive transformation theory (CTT) is selected because instead of focusing on external factors it identifies a gradual internal shift that must occur to achieve long-term crime and gang desistance. Following the explanation of the theory through the introduction of its four major types of cognitive transformation, the section outlines how the theory fits in with and complements the other conceptual theories jointly formulating the thesis' conceptual framework and theoretical lens.

Development of the Cognitive Transformation Theory

Giordano and her colleagues develop the CTT to counterbalance Laub and Sampson's (1993) theory of social control, which argues that a single critical event such as employment (Uggen, 2000), marriage (Laub et al., 1998), or fatherhood (Moloney et al., 2009; Savolainen, 2009) can alone redirect one's life course. Girodano et al. (2002) posit that events are not critical due to their character; rather they become meaningful because of the individuals' subjective experiences and responses to them. Therefore, they view that the sole focus on an external event cannot adequately explain crime and gang disengagement, because it neglects the individual's sense of self (or the changes in the identity hierarchal system) which is essential for conducting the process of leaving the criminal and gang lifestyle.

Despite asserting that decision-making is vital to role disengagement, CTT acknowledges that the relationship between identity and external factors rooted in their social context cannot be overlooked (Healy, 2014; King, 2013). Interactions with social conventions and institutions are although recognised to sway decisions, social factors rather than remaining central, become scaffolding/supporting elements in the change process (Weaver, 2016).

Consequently, CTT posits that delinquent role disengagement is not merely a reaction to structural circumstances or external events but emerges from an individual's up front internal work or carefully evaluated motivation for change (Soyer, 2013).

Critical Events

From this perspective, critical events, or "turning points" (Laub & Sampson, 1993, pp. 304-305), also take on a new meaning in CTT. Giordano et al. (2002) posit that in crime and gang desistance investigations retrospective life story accounts often provide only a broad and selective insight into seemingly minor factors because such narratives primarily foreground memorable moments that contributed to the unfolding of identity transformation (Sweeten et al., 2013). Instead of solely focusing on the importance of key events' context specificity, which can obscure the subjective reasons that motivate individuals to "attend to … new possibilities, discard old habits, and begin the process of crafting a different way of life" (Giordano et al., 2002, p. 1000), CTT urges to recognise the significance of less defining events. More recently, Klaus (2022, p. 222) reinforces this point by saying:

> [T]he occurrence of a so-called turning point and the attribution of a certain importance to it in the overall process of change, of desistance, are possible only because a number of other, smaller and less noticeable processes have already taken place beforehand and after.[42]

This internal mechanism encompasses antecedent processes, which by coalescing or acting in tandem gradually shift interpretation and assignation of meanings to the events and subsequently gives rise to motivation to reform. Giordano et al. (2002) specify the series of cognitive changes in the following four stages.

[42]Further discussion about the term of turning points is provided in Chapter Two (pp. 32-34).

The Four Types of Cognitive Shifts

The first shift is the basic openness to change (Giordano, 2016). While the readiness to reform is fundamental to produce receptivity for the transformative catalyst and a fertile ground for the rest of the transformation process, in itself it is insufficient to generate lasting transformation (Giordano et al., 2007). Hence, as outlined in the second type of cognitive change, the reciprocal relationship between the envrionment and the individual becomes key in the change process. The critical events described by Giordano et al. (2002, p. 1000) as "set of hooks for change", while acommodated by the environment, their potential transformative power is contigent on one's attitude toward them. As desire for change increases, the perceived criticality of hooks for change becomes instrumental in shaping how continued deliquent behaviour is regarded, fostering the construction of a "conventional "replacement self" that can supplant the marginal one that must be left behind" (Giordano et al., 2002, p. 1001).

The third cognitive shift occurs when the envisionment of a conventional replacement self begins to act like a cognitive filter that guides future decision-making. This filtering process is essential for desisting criminals or gang members because it prevents deviation from the conventional path when frustration and obstacles are encountered during the maintenance of law-abiding lifestyle (Maruna & LeBel, 2010). This refined approach to novel situations not only aligns problem solution strategies with conventional expectations but also forms the foundation for sustained behaviour change. The crystalisation of behaviour change, therefore, directly results in the increased investment in the conventional role, which renders the previous lifestyle less attractive, practical, and personally relevant. In this final shift, fully formed positive emotions connected to the new role demonstrate the consolidation of a conventional replacement self, which, by avoiding behaviours that could jeopardise the role, brings the cognitive transformation process to a conclusion.

Critique of CTT and its Link with RET

While Giordano et al.'s (2002) sequence of cognitive changes elaborates the way delinquent role disengagement formulates from a psychological perspective, it fails to explain what external impacts bring about the desire to change and why some people remain in certain social positions even though their investment in the role significantly abated (Weaver, 2019). For this reason, Sampson and Laub (2016, p. 329) argue that, because self-reports can lack deliberate understanding of action causes, positioning identity centrally "may have been a distraction rather than a theoretical advance." In this view, the articulation of reasons for actioning thoughts is saturated with controversy, inaccuracy, and bias. Consequently, role transition cannot be reliably understood as the product of a premediated cognitive change, instead it should be considered as the response (or social interaction) to environmental stimuli, which triggers dissatisfaction with a role that is followed by cognitive and behavioural shifts.

Paternoster and Bushway's (2009) critical approach to elaborate on this crucial factor of the change process, draws on Baumeister's (1994) concept of crystallisation of discontent. They posit that the diminishing appeal of criminal behaviour or gang membership is triggered by multiple unpleasant features of delinquency (such as arrests, imprisonment, inter and intra-gang violence, and disappointments in other members' actions). These negative experiences that gradually affect multiple life aspects, become "*linked together*" into a coherent body of dissatisfaction and "attributed to the criminal identity itself" (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009, p. 1123). In this view, the crystallisation of discontent that catalyses identity transformation is driven less by cognitive shifts, than by the pressures of external forces.

In conclusion, while the discontent with previous roles initiates role transitions as emphasised in Ebaugh's (1988) RET, CTT provides insight into how cognitive shifts propel individuals to reinterpret the meaning of events and conventional roles, thereby producing a subjective experience of the hooks in critical events or potential new roles. Additionally, CTT

describes how cognitive transformation can filter behvaiours, which guides future decision-making and redefines previous roles as undesirable and personally irrelevant. Therefore, the amalgamation of the role exit and cognitive transformation with the labelling theories provides a comprehensive explanation of how criminal gang members transition out of their highly stigmatised role and reintegrate into the conventional society. The following section further elaborates on the link between the conceptual theories and offers an overview of this intricate and complex disengagement process.

A Summary of how the Conceptual Theories Link: The Formulation of Analytical Lens

Through socialisation individuals learn the meaning and implications of labels. However, it is the social reactions like identification, response, and treatment as a delinquent that induces the internalisation of labels. Dominant groups within societies distinguish those deemed untrustworthy, and often inflict punitive measures, such as incarceration, victimisation, and social exclusion (silencing or cancellation) to supress behaviours perceived to be objectionable. These labels can restrict societal prospects and drive labelled individuals toward alternative reference groups, where salient identity (or secondary deviance) forms.

Often due to intra-group dynamics and external factors, a labelled's sense of belonging to factions begin to wear away. As a result, the negative consequences associated with the labelled role prompt critical reflections on its costs and ignite receptiveness to alternative roles. While role exit commonly attributed to crucial external occurrences, such events only become transformative when imbued with personal meaning or function as hooks for change.

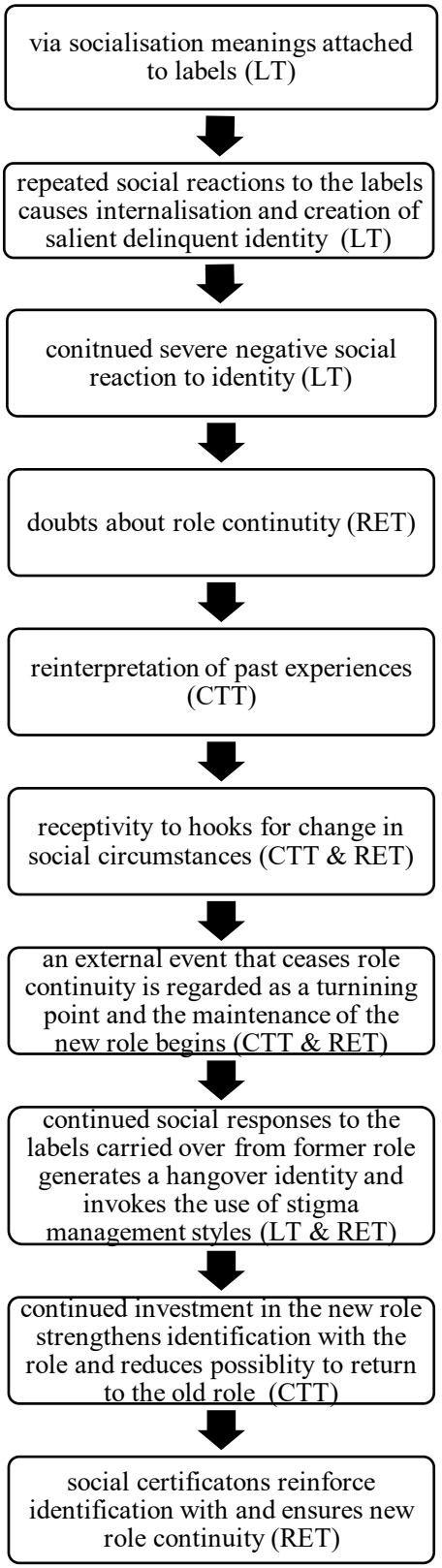
Individuals exiting a stigmatised role are highly likely to retain remnants of their former identity, resulting what has been termed as a hangover identity. Consequently, they continue to be regarded, treated and responded to as they still actively occupy the former role. This social reaction hinders detachment from old identities and compels the employment of stigma

management strategies. However, continued investment in the new role, combined with social recognition or certification of change, can help reinforce a replacement identity.

Guided by symbolic interactionism, labelling, role exit, and cognitive transformation theories, this summary offers a structured explanation of how gang entry, disengagement, and desistance processes follow and influence one another. Figure 3. 2 illustrates this interlink between these processes and theoretical concepts generating a conceptual framework that forms the foundation for the study's analytical lens, which the next section explores in detail.

Figure 3. 2

Linking the Three Conceptual Theories



Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

Before linking the conceptual lens with this study's analytical framework, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), this section introduces the three major theoretical traditions that underpin and inform the formulation of IPA's methodological process. Following the introduction of IPA, the chapter concludes how the conceptual framework shapes the theoretical lens and guides the interpretive phenomenological analysis of the data.

The Development of IPA

IPA is a relatively newly developed (around the mid-1990s) qualitative inquiry tool, which aims to explore how humans respond, attach personal meaning to, and interpret life experiences. Despite paying attention to ordinary experiences, IPA typically focuses on events that bear greater significance in individuals' life, particularly those with the potential to alter life course and prompt identity transitions (Smith, 2011; Smith et al., 2009).

Additionally, IPA is not only focusing on the mere description of the role exit and formation of a new identity but also concerned with exploring the individual's subjective interpretation and reflections of the lived experiences which incept the process of identity transformation. Furthermore, IPA brings attention to the researcher's reflexivity, because it views that the investigator can never gain full access to the investigated's experience. For this reason, IPA urges an in-depth and detailed examination of the experience to capture its original meaning as closely as possible (Smith, 1996, 2004; Smith et al., 2009). To accomplish a comprehensive exploration and interpretation of a given phenomenon, IPA draws on three theoretical concepts, namely phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Palmer et al., 2010). To gain an insight into these concepts and how they serve as a building block for IPA's analytical process, a brief summary of each theoretical approach is provided.

Phenomenology

IPA's commitment to investigating individuals' lived experiences aligns with phenomenology (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008; Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). This theoretical perspective, developed by a German mathematician and philosopher, Edmund Husserl (Laverty, 2003; Porter & Robinson, 2011), is designed to recognise the links between the essential components of an experience, which construct and define the meaning of it in a situated context (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). In other words, the phenomenological aim is to investigate the features of an experience that make the experience special or unique (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). As Dilthey (1976, p. 210) explains:

> Whatever presents itself as a unit in the flow of time because it has a unitary meaning, is the smallest unit which can be called an experience. Any more comprehensive unit which is made up of parts of a life, linked by a common meaning, is also called an experience, even where the parts are separated by interrupting events.

To access the elements of what Dilthey refers to as a comprehensive unit and to gain an insight into an individual's sense-making of the world, Husserl (1931) calls for a series of bracketing processes (Larkin et al., 2011). Bracketing is a key method used in phenomenology that calls for researchers to set aside or suspend their a priori knowledge and presuppositions about the experience they are investigating. This process, also referred to as epoché, helps researchers approach the phenomenon with fresh eyes, minimising the distortion of their preconceptions during their quest for meanings in participants' accounts. Rather than relying on fixed categories and predetermined expectations, bracketing allows the researcher to remain receptive to the participants' perspectives about their experience and the way they encountered and made sense of them. As Moran (2000) explains, this suspension of judgement assists the researcher in truly engaging and exploring the experience beyond its taken for granted meaning

and increasing the potential to uncover meanings that might otherwise be overlooked. Put simply, bracketing lets the experience speak for itself and illuminates the way individuals attach currency to their unique subjective perception of the experience Osborne (1994).

Hermeneutics

To interpret and make sense of individuals' active reflection and sense-making of their experiences, IPA leans on the theoretical approach of hermeneutics (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). According to Leonard (1989, p. 50), hermeneutics, originating from the Greek God, Hermes, translates as:

> [T]he idea of bringing to understanding, particularly where this process involves language. That is, something foreign, strange, and separated in time, space, or experience is revealed so as to seem familiar and comprehensible.

Initially used for analysing and interpreting religious scriptures, Hans-Georg Gadamer lifts hermeneutics from a method of interpretive inquiry to a philosophical platform emphasising the circumstances in which understanding occurs (Laverty, 2003). It has since been widely utilised across disciplines to uncover original meanings of texts (or an object[43]), understand the social context of an object's production (historicity), and explore the object's contemporary relevance (Ho & Yuen, 2009; Leonard, 1989; Porter & Robinson, 2011).

Like in phenomenology, hermeneutics also focuses on exploring an experience, but hermeneutics rejects the phenomenological precept that a direct insider standpoint can ever be accomplished (Eatough & Smith, 2006). Accordingly, Gadamer (1998) argues that every experience, concept, and meaning attached to objects has perimeters or horizons that define their structure. These horizons arise when individuals start interacting with something or

[43]Further explanation is offered about the objects and their meanings earlier in this chapter under The Development of Symbolic Interactionism section (pp. 59-60).

someone new. In these dialogues, there is no completely isolated interpreters because without any kind of commonality or basic knowledge between the interpreter and the subject matter interactions would not make the dialogue possible (Tappan, 1990). Hence, from the hermeneutic point of view, completely bracketing out preconceptions and a presuppositionless starting point to investigate a subject matter is practically unattainable (Annells, 1996).

Thus, the recognition that the interpretation and sense-making of personal experiences is always partially shaped by the interpreter's presuppositions generates the hermeneutic stance that penetration beyond the expression and full reconstruction of others' life experiences is problematic (Chapman & Smith, 2002; Eatough & Smith, 2006). However, to get a closer look at the insider's perspective and own understanding of being-in-world (or sense-making), language and tradition, through which humans mediate, interpret, and understand their own and others' world, are used as accessories (Dostal, 2021; Wolff, 2017). While language and other symbolic interactions serve as a universal media to transmit messages, tradition acts like a filter and provides a lens which determines the way individuals receive and interpret these messages, construct biases, prejudices, and presuppositions and consequently embed these in their own historical context (Ho & Yuen, 2009; Johnson, 2022).

Being more than a mere symbolic tool, language takes on an important role in the hermeneutic analysis by mediating the interdependence between parts (experience) and the whole (tradition). In this context, language functions as a device that helps exploring individuals' worldviews, reflecting their understanding of their own unique social and cultural background (embeddedness) (Porter & Robinson, 2011). Thus, understanding is not a simple reproduction of knowledge, but transpires and expands through a continuous interplay between the subject matter's horizons and the interpreter's original standpoint (Wolff, 2017).

As Gadamer (1998, p. 379) states, "to reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's own point of view", rather,

it is a response to the horizon implicit in the subject matter, one that transforms us "into a communion in which we do not remain what we are". In such manner, the investigation of a subject matter inevitably challenges the interpreter's presuppositions, anticipation, and biases. The dialogue between these two actors, therefore, revises the interpreter's distorted prejudices and biases and fuses the interpretation of the subject matter into the interpreter's own horizon (Smith, 2007). This process, which Gadamer calls the fusion of horizons, accelerates penetration into the inherent meaning of the subject matter or the establishment of the phenomenon (although reconstruction of the original meaning is never completely possible) (Polkinghorne, 1983; Porter & Robinson, 2011).

Hence, Moules (2002, pp. 12-13) posits that phenomenology and hermeneutics are interdependent theoretical dimensions because "[h]ermeneutics without phenomenology is interpretation without context, without situating in it in the world. Phenomenology without hermeneutics is arguably nothing but a façade." Moules' (2002) statement is reflected in IPA's methodical position by drawing attention to researcher's active two-fold role in the interpretation process (Eatough & Smith, 2006).

IPA recognises this bidirectional process as a sequential order, in which the researcher's position is similar to the participant's, a human being drawing on everyday resources to make sense of their own world (Smith et al., 1999). However, at the same time, the researcher differs from the participant as they can only access the participant's world through the participant's narrative and interpret that through their own standpoint informed by their own experiences. This double hermeneutic process is essentially the participant's meaning-making process, which firstly embodies their own interpretation of the experience, then secondly the application of the researcher's sense-making of the participant's meaning-making method (Smith, 2011, 2019; Smith & Shinebourne, 2012).

Idiography

To construct the meaning of the participant's sense-making process of their experiences (or establish the phenomenon), IPA applies a detailed investigative interpretation of each participant's account (Smith & Osborn, 2008). This meticulous analytical attention to the social and cultural tradition (the whole), which determines individuals' perception of experiences (part) is adopted from the theoretical tradition of idiographic inquiry[44]. According to Windelband (1894/1998), the case-by-case analysis of historically and contextually situated experiences with unstructured observations, interviewing, and other idiomatic methods allows closer observation of how individuals' minds function (Allport, 1937; Korulczyk et al., 2019).

With this type of strategical approach, the individuals' unique responses to social events (for example relocation) and psychological dilemma (such as childhood trauma) can be investigated without pursuing general claims or what Windleband (1894/1998, p. 13) describe as "what always is". Instead, the investigation's focus is on the unique meanings attached to the experience, making it possible to provide detailed statements about the individual's lived experiences or "what once was" (Windelband, 1894/1998, p. 13). Consequently, rather than formulating definitive understandings of larger social groups' responses to events, idiographic inquiry casts light on the particular aspects of an individual's experience and its convergence or divergence with other individuals' similar experiences (Smith et al., 1995; Ungvarsky, 2020).

Evidently, by drawing on phenomenological, hermeneutic, and idiographical precepts IPA is concerned with capturing and portraying what it is like for the individual in a particular situation and what meaning the individual attaches to this experience. Additionally, through a

[44]The dichotomy between idiographic and nomothetic concepts of understanding a phenomenon is first outlined by Wilhelm Windelband (Lamiell, 1998). Windelband posits that natural sciences, which comprise of sciences of law generally utilises the nomothetic method of inquiry because its consideration of "what always is" (Windelband, 1894/1998, p. 13). In other words, nomothetic approach seeks to establish statements that are timeless, impersonal, and typical. In humanities, therefore, nomothetics are applied to study larger social patterns to establish general rules for human conduct and relationship (Valsiner, 1986). For the formulation of universal conclusions about human behaviour, nomothetic research method employs large survey summary and statistical data collection instruments, rendering its use more extensive in quantitative study designs (Crossman, 2019).

detailed exploration of experience components in its unique context, IPA can provide a detailed description of the experience (Vicary & Ferguson, 2025). Meanwhile, IPA urges the researcher to be attentive to their preconceived assumptions about the experience and the fact that full access to the experience cannot be obtained. With this in mind, the chapter now turns to its conclusion, offering a reflection on how the conceptual insights discussed above are woven together to inform the study's analytical lens and collectively guide the interpretive phenomenological analysis of participants' narratives.

Linking the Conceptual and Analytical Framework

In line with the symbolic interactionist perspective, the event of gang desistance is preceded by two major experiences: first, the development of a salient identification with the gang and, second, the exit from this role (Kitsuse, 1968; Matsueda, 2014; Mead, 1934). As LT elucidates, the major determinant that stimulates the development of a gang member identity is the negative social reactions to or labelling of delinquent behaviours, which crystallises individuals' discontent with and triggers withdrawal from the prosocial reference groups (such as family, schools, peer groups, and any other prosocial institutions) (Baumeister, 1994; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). Similarly, as RET and CTT describe, the deliberation of negative events attributed to the gang lifestyle incepts and crystalises the role exit process (Ebaugh, 1988; Giordano et al., 2002). The significance of these push and pull factors in the process of leaving the gang emerges from social and self-interactions leading to cessation of the criminal gang role continuance (Decker et al., 2014).

The phenomenological process employed in IPA illuminates the components of experiences, the differences between life events' significance, and highlights those which are considered to alter life trajectories (Larkin et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2009). In the field of gang desistance, these lived experiences are described as turning points or critical events which are

considered to guide individuals into and out of the gang lifestyle (Decker & Lauristen, 2002; Giordano et al., 2002; Klaus, 2022; Laub & Sampson, 1993). Furthermore, IPA's hermeneutic stance can describe in detail how accumulation of seemingly unimportant lived experiences can incept an individual's reinterpretation process of the meanings attached to their lifestyle (Klaus, 2022). In hermeneutics, this evaluation and the exploration of alternatives occurs through a fusion of horizons. In the gang desistance context this means that during the evaluation of the gang and alternative roles individuals fuse the reinterpreted meanings of the experiences and events with their subjective circumstances, which then produces gradual role cessation (Berger et al., 2017; Decker et al., 2014). In line with the notion of idiography, IPA can portray individual gang members' subjective meanings attached to the experiences and bring attention to the congruencies and incongruences between these experiences building a comprehensive picture of gang desistance nuances (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012).

Arguably, IPA is well positioned to explore former gang members' lived experiences of entry, exit, and desistance, because it aspires to illuminate shared and universal responses to specific situations. In a six-phase analytical process, namely immersion in the data, coding, formulation of emerging themes, identifying connections, developing an initial table of themes, analysing subsequent cases, and finally conducting a cross-case analysis to identify convergence and divergence across tables of themes, IPA's aim is to construct an overarching thematic structure (Smith et al., 2009). In the following chapter, the practical application of these analytical steps throughout the data saturation process is addressed alongside the strategies used to recruit participants, structure interviews, and collect and transcribe data.

Chapter Four

Methodology and Methods

The research methodology and methods are presented in two sections in this chapter. After elaborating on how the qualitative research design underpins this research project, the chapter outlines the link between the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and the qualitative methodology. Still within this section, with the aid of IPA's strong phenomenological and hermeneutic focus, my researcher's lens is demonstrated and my reflections on conducting a data analysis with interpretive phenomenology are offered.

The methods section also has two parts. The first part discusses the importance of a preformulated interview structure and interview schedule and a pre-defined sample size and sample universe in ensuring a successful data collection process. In addition to the project's methodology, the way the requirements of the Massey University's ethics approval governed the design of these research methods are also explained.

The second part describes the methods applied in their practical order. After offering a summary of the strategies used to recruit participants for this project, the study's participants are introduced through their demographical and geographical attributes. These characteristics are summarised in Table 4. 1 (p. 114). The way steps were taken to set up and conduct interviews, to transcribe audio-recordings, and to safely store transcriptions and other research relevant documents is presented prior to detailing the interpretive phenomenological data analysis. Finally, using Figure 4. 1 (p. 123) to present the final theme structure also referred to as the thematic map and Figure 4. 2 (p. 124) to depict the structure of the categories, the section outlines how the figures in the findings chapters visually aid the elucidation of the thematic map's elements, namely life phases, categories, themes, and subthemes.

Methodology

This project's aim, proposed research questions, and theoretical framework require the use of methodology and methods that necessitate the researcher's engagement "in considerations of disclosure, advocacy, consciousness, participation, identification, positioning, and agency" (Bishop, 1999, p. 104). Due to its flexibility and exploratory nature, the qualitative research design was considered suitable for exploring the participants' subjective experiences of gang entry, gang exit, and maintenance of gang desistance. Moreover, because the aim of qualitative research is to discover deeper understandings that is formulated from an in-depth analysis and interpretation of the data set, it is inextricably linked to IPA's theoretical traditions.

Due to being rooted in phenomenology and hermeneutics, IPA as a methodological approach, inevitably influences the way I see my position in the research and the steps, I have taken to bracket my pre-existing knowledge to discover new insights in relation to former gang members' stigma management and desistance methods. The use of IPA for data analysis highlighted its strengths and weaknesses as a methodological approach and as an analytical tool. With the interpretive data analysis approach the study's findings were generated, which directly addressed the research aim by providing answers to the four primary research questions namely: What experiences of stigma do desisting gang members have? How do experiences of stigma impact on desisting gang members' emerging former gang member identity development? How do desisting gang members protect their emerging desired identity in the face of adversity? And how does the emerging former gang member identity contribute to the changes in the desisting gang member's social networks?

Qualitative Research

Qualitative studies are designed to collect and evaluate information in a flexible way, taking into account the participant's personal background and role embedded in their complex

social system before formulating assumption or drawing conclusion (Faugier & Sargeant, 1997). Moreover, Marvasti (2004, p. 7) suggests that the primary concern of qualitative research is to provide a "detailed description and analysis of the quality, or the substance, of the human experience". Hence, it prioritises the participant's personal experiences, or their perspective on "what once was", to explore complex, nuanced, or sensitive topics that are not easily captured through quantitative study designs (Windelband, 1894/1998, p. 13).

By gaining deep insights into individuals' lived experiences, social dynamics, and cultural contexts, qualitative research enables investigation of phenomena that are relatively difficult to observe or access because little is known about them or pertain to members of hard-to-reach populations (Creswell, 2014; Munhall, 1989). In line with this view, Ragin (1994) argues that qualitative social research can give voice to the marginalised and the socially rejected, therefore, it is particularly suitable to investigate "areas that involve sensitive, illegal or deviant issues" (Hendriks & Blanken, 1992, p. 21)

Qualitative research is concerned with the exploration of similarities and dissimilarities of experiences amongst the investigated cohort (Ragin, 1994). This generates its perspective which focuses on participants' reality and sense-making of their objective world that is only relevant to them (Silverman, 2017). To communicate the nature of these experiences, qualitative research captures and interprets how social interactions, cultural and social environmental influences shape participants' perspectives on their life course changes. Similarly to symbolic interactionism, the qualitative philosophy is underpinned by the view that existence of a social order is dynamic because of the constant societal changes caused by perpetual human interactions (Denzin, 2004).

According to Shaw (2005), the qualitative research design is particularly relevant to social workers, whose work involves close interactions with individuals experiencing social disadvantage and requires at least a broad knowledge and understanding of these individuals'

worldviews moulded by their lived experiences and interactions with their objective reality (Humphries, 2007). With insights into the struggles of marginalised individuals, social workers are well positioned to explore topics centred around the experiences of hard-to-reach community members (Abrams, 2010; Juhila, 2004). In this light, a qualitative research design within the broader social work paradigm is well suited to capture and describe how former gang members experienced stigma and employed various coping styles to soften its impact.

Despite having some understanding, according to Whitmore (2001) and Carey (2012), social worker researchers must still exercise reflexivity or bracket pre-existing beliefs or assumptions about participants' worldviews. In qualitative research, awareness of subjectivity and biases is paramount for yielding new insights (Denzin, 1970; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). This reflexive stance helps counterbalance established dominant understandings that may otherwise be inappropriately generalised to marginalised social groups (Munhall, 1989). These three core concerns of qualitative inquiry namely seeking to understand a phenomenon (1), engaging in the phenomenon's detailed reflexive exploration and interpretation (2), and constructing and portraying its specific meaning to individuals or groups (3), amalgamate in a coherent manner in IPA, which, is therefore, selected as the analytical framework for this research project.

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

As outlined in the previous chapter, to accomplish a comprehensive exploration and interpretation of a given phenomenon, IPA draws on three theoretical concepts namely phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. The coherence of these theoretical approaches provides IPA with a systemic data analysis process in which the researcher's primary focus is to try to uncover and make sense of how the participant is trying to make sense of their own experiences (Ungvarsky, 2020). Alase (2017) and Smith et al. (2009, pp. 35-36) describe this

analytical approach as a double hermeneutic process that is essentially the researcher's reflexive approach to participants' accounts because:

> [T]he dual role of the researcher as both like and unlike the participant. In one sense, the researcher is like the participant, is a human being drawing on everyday human resources in order to make sense of the world. On the other hand, the researcher is not the participant, she/he only has access to the participant's experience through what the participant reports about it, and is also seeing this through the researcher's own, experientially-informed lens.

Because of its phenomenological and hermeneutic stance, IPA requires the researcher to consider their own critically influential and potentially biased position in the research process. These biases can be addressed through the practice of bracketing, which involves actively examining, articulating, and setting aside preconceptions and assumptions about the researched topic (Larkin et al., 2006). This bracketing process is maintained throughout IPA's six-phase analytical approach namely immersion in the data, coding, formulation of emerging themes, finding connections between the themes and developing a table of themes, analysis of subsequent cases, and finally the cross-case analysis by identifying converging and diverging themes across the tables of themes. A detailed explanation of how these steps were applied in practice is provided in the Data Analysis section (pp. 119-122).

Researcher's Lens: Bracketing Pre-Existing Knowledge

As noted in Chapter One (pp. 4-6), I first came into contact with ANZ gang members while I was working at the Christchurch City Mission as a night shelter social worker. Through conversations with the homeless who were former or active gang members, I gained insights into what the gang lifestyle entailed. However, it was during my work alongside transformed gang members in the Youth Justice Department of Oranga Tamariki (formerly Child Youth and

Family) and study towards the Massey University Social Work Master degree, that I developed an interest in how gang members enter and exit gangs, and pursue redemption.

During the completion of the Master's thesis my understanding of the New Zealand Aotearoa gang history (Dennehy & Newbold, 2001; Gilbert, 2013), national and international facts about gangs (Lala, 1996; Manley, 1995; Spergel, 1995), and theories of gang socialisation and gang desistance (Healy, 2014; Maruna, 2001; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; Pyrooz et al., 2014; Tamatea, 2015; Weaver, 2019) further crystalised. However, the inductive approach in qualitative data analysis reshaped my understanding, particularly in relation to international studies like Decker and Lauristen's (2002) and Pyrooz and Decker's (2011) notions of true desistance[45]. This reflection on the participants' desistance process was clearly articulated throughout the master's project.

For example, the emergent themes from the data offered nuanced insights into how former gang members who retained strong social and emotional ties or honorary membership with their respective gang but no longer participated in the criminal gang activities managed to successfully transition into helping professions and justifiably regarded themselves as reformed and desisted gang members. Consequently, rather than rigidly applying the pre-defined gang membership farmeworks, this nuanced understanding of gang membership, disengagement, and identity transformation prompted me to adjust participant criteria for this project.

Another example that required bracketing in this project was my a priori knowledge when I was analysing the data centering around participants' perspectives about employment. While, gang desistance literature considers obtaining gainful employment as a key event, that automatically leads to criminal gang exit, in this study participants did not share this view (Laub & Sampson, 1993; Uggen, 2000). Instead, they attributed a slightly different meaning to

[45]Chapter Two (p. 39) provides further elaboration on the definition of true desistance.

employment, seeing it as instrumental in successfully maintaining gang desistance. This new understanding then cast light on why the reactive methods of stigma management became crucial in the initial phases of gang desistance.

I also utilised IPA bracketing technique in relation to the indigenous theoretical approaches, including whakahoki mauri, Kaupapa Māori, and other decolonisation theories (Bishop & Glynn, 1999; Keane et al., 2017; Workman, 2014). While these theories were considered during the study design phase, I ultimately decided not to adopt them as theoretical frameworks given my anticipation that the study sample would comprise of individuals with diverse ethnic background. Additionally, I bracketed out these theoretical approaches because the study was designed to examine structural impacts and broader social conditions influencing gang members' desistance attempts rather than exploring and placing emphasis on individual cultural experiences.

While IPA's requirement to bracket my pre-existing knowledge was one of several benefits which assisted me in generating new insights into the complexities of the gang desistance process, the application of IPA's analytical approach presented several methodological challenges. IPA's strengths and limitations became more apparent during the design of the research and its application in data analysis.

Reflections on IPA's Strengths and Limitations

In order to explore how individuals make sense of significant life events, IPA applies a holistic case-by-case analysis of individuals' lived experiences. While this idiographic focus provided rich and nuanced insights into how participants perceived and made sense of their objective worlds, interactions with others, and social conditions, the detailed examination of the collected data was time consuming. Given the larger than recommended sample size for IPA and timeframe constrains, some case analyses became less nuanced, shifting the focus

toward locating congruencies and incongruencies of themes across cases. This has rendered data analysis somewhat similar to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2022).

Reviewing the ANZ and international literature was essential to widen my objectivity and understanding to ultimately better grasp the participants' potential gang entry, gang exit, and stigma experiences. However, at the same time, as demonstrated in the previous section, I actively utilised bracketing to minimise researcher bias. Yet, the question remains whether I had adequately reflected on other potentially influential preconceived ideas about the process of gang desistance and stigma management. From this reflection, I realised it is a possibility that unthought-of preconceptions might have influenced my subjective interpretations of the participants' sense-making of their lived experiences making the same narratives susceptible to different interpretations by different readers. This hermeneutic approach to the insights and knowledge I derived from the research process suggests that alternative interpretations of qualitative data is always a possibility, potentially making the replication and transferability of not only this but qualitative studies in general more challenging.

Finally, recognising the researcher's hermeneutic or inherently subjective approach, IPA offers a flexible analytical process (Smith et al., 1999). Acknowledging that qualitative analysis is a personal endeavour, where researchers adapt the method to their interpretive style, IPA does not prescribe "a single 'method' for working with data" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 79). While I appreciated this "healthy flexibility" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 79) in relation to data saturation, theme development and clustering within and across cases, it sometimes hindered the construction of a logically ordered thematic structure. Thus, I relied on Smith and Osborn's (2008) step-by-step approach to IPA to guide my engagement with the data in a more creative and methodical manner (Smith et al., 1999; Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Shinebourne, 2012).

In addition, the lack of analytical rigidity further complicated the saturation of the large volume of collected data and my extensive explanatory notes. As a result, the presentation of

themes from this extensive volume, at times buried the individuality and uniqueness of participants' life stories, preventing full adherence to IPA's idiographic approach.

Notwithstanding the limitations, the interpretive phenomenology embedded in a qualitative approach was the most suitable analytical tool for this research. This methodological design offered to generate keen attention to the nuances in participants' experiences producing valuable new understandings of their lived realities, which have often been overlooked in previous studies. However, the selection of this methodology not only directed the research design but also governed the practical implementation of the research methods (subjects discussed in the following sections). In this context, the chosen methodology was imperative in guiding data collection, interpretation, and the formulation of findings.

Designing the Methods

Prior to their practical application, the methods utilised in this research required to be prearranged with careful consideration given to the study's qualitative and IPA approach and the requirements of Massey University's ethics approval. Thus, alongside the interview structure, the interview schedule, the sample size, and the sample universe were outlined in advance to set the foundation and assist the data collection process.

Interview Structure

In most qualitative research, the design of the interview structure is required before the data collection begins. Besides the researcher's preconceived ideas about the topic, a preorganised interview format can facilitate composed interactions between the researcher and the participant, yielding rich data (Tappan, 1990). Due to the qualitative method of data generation being always situational and contextual, it takes place via face-to-face or online conferences in individual or group discussions or observations (Bishop & Glynn, 1999).

However, the most common data collection method is the one-on-one participant interviews (Mason, 2018). This format enables the researcher to provide their undivided attention to the participant and enables participants to uninterruptedly recall and share their lived experiences. This form of interviewing style is generally considered more suitable to gather sensitive information about the participant and their lived experiences than focus groups or other group based data collection methods (Faleolo, 2014).

According to Roulston (2010), there are three types of individual interview format, which can be arranged along a continuum. One end of the spectrum entails the structured interviewing model, which calls for strict adherence to asking the set of questions in a fixed order. This interview structure limits the collection of a wide range of information and prevents participants from freely venturing into off-topic areas (Kvale, 1996). The other end contains the unstructured[46] or loosely structured interview formats, which although leaves ample room for the researcher to navigate the dialogue, the lack of set questions can create a messier interview flow because the researcher needs to think on their feet to ask topic relevant questions. This can also lead to the collection of volumes of irrelevant information, which can make the identification of the theme patterns challenging (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

In the profile of third interview style, the previous two interview structures' characteristics are combined in a semi-structured format. Semi-structured interviewing while requires a preset guide for the interview, it is typically formulated in a way that is pliable allowing the participant to engage in a free-flowing conversation and go into novel areas, which can still be relevant to the research questions (Padgett, 2017).

Due to the flexibility of this interview format and IPA's tendency to "be working at its best with research topics that are relatively new,… which we do not know much about or in

[46]The use of term unstructured is contested by Mason (2018, p. 109) as she asserts "no research interview can be completely lacking in some form of structure".

areas that are inherently complex", Smith and Shinebourne (2012, p. 74) recommend the use of semi-structured interview style for the collection of in-depth, elaborate personal reflections on lived experiences. Following the authors' recommendations, I developed a semi-structured preliminary interview structure that would guide the exploration of participants' perception of their social reality and properties of their gang-centric life experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

Interview Guide

Mason (2018) posits that although time consuming, developing an interview guide is necessary for mapping sensitive yet straightforward interview prompts, which adequately cover the main research questions. Following Mason's (2018) suggestions I organised the body of the interview guide into six broad domains namely gang engagement, gang exit, reconnection with non-gang communities, stigma shortly after exiting the gang, finding employment in social or faith-based sector, and stigma now. The opening question was left broad and casual to invite participants to recall their childhood experiences which they considered to have contributed to propelling them towards gang affiliation.

However, as the interview guide progressed, questions became increasingly intimate focusing on participants' experiences of gang socialisation, gang exit, and gang desistance. Although the questions became more specific, they were left open ended to foster a less formal conversation, encouraging participants to express themselves freely and provide an insight into their broader experiences (Burgess, 1984). This design aligned with IPA's hermeneutical and phenomenological traditions as the questions were developed with a priori knowledge of conceptions pertaining to gang socialisation, gang desistance, and stigma management but rather than attempting to examine extant theories, the findings would emerge through an interpretation of participants' perspectives and sense-making of their experience, which would either support or refute pre-existing theoretical concepts. Yet, to establish who may participate in the research, a sample universe is needed to be defined.

Defining a Sample Universe

According to Luborsky and Rubinstein (1995), a sampling universe which comprises of individuals with similar demographic, geographical, and life history characteristics to aid homogenous data collection is seldom fully defined in the initial phases of research settings and planning. Instead, it is more likely that the sample universe begins to crystalise when the researcher becomes more familiar with the study's empirical and ontological connections and starts framing the research questions (Denzin, 1970; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Formulating the sample universe for this study followed a similar course. As I familiarised myself with the national and international literature on crime and gang socialisation, desistance, and stigma management, and learnt about Massey University's ethical approach concerning the investigation of ANZ gang populations (Massey University, 2017), the parameters of the study's sample universe began to take shape. Drawing on insights of the Master's thesis, ANZ former gang members' perspectives on desistance status were incoprorated into the current study.

This eliminated strict restrictions on gang membership status and former gang members who retained firm social ties or honorary membership with their respective gang but maintained offence-free lifestyle and worked, volunteered, or studied in social and faith-based services were also invited to participate in this project. Participation was limited to English due to the study's time and financial constrains that prevented finding quality of professional interpretation or translation services (Hoffman et al., 2025). The presence of a translator during interviews was also considered potentially disruptive to the natural flow of conversation. Additionally, female participants were excluded given their peripherial and inferior status in traditional ANZ gangs (Dennehy & Newbold, 2001).

Despite the alteration, the new participant criteria left the sampling universe homogeneous, which aided this project to specifically explore former gang members'

perception of rejection, labelling, and stigma prior, during, and post-gang membership status. Furthermore, homogeneity enhanced the depth of analysis because it provided a more consistent basis to compare and analyse the pattern of convergence and divergence between participants' particular experiences. While a homogenous sample universe is a crucial aspect and fundamental requirement for IPA, a cohort size that suits the study's scope is also prescribed by IPA (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008).

Drafting a Sample Size

For drafting a sample size, the following considerations are required: the project's theoretical alignments and the scope of the study which includes the allocated resources and time for participant recruitment, data collection, and the approach selected to analyse the data. Consequently, Silverman (2011, 2017) emphasises that identifying the boundaries of the sample size by estimating a minimum and maximum number of cases is vital during the study's planning phase to forecast the project's viability and feasibility.

To ensure that the research is in line with IPA phenomenological focus and provides the individual cases a locatable voice, an elaborate analysis required for each dataset. To avoid overshadowing individual stories, IPA research is typically conducted on a smaller sample size that ranges from six to sixteen participants (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Shinebourne, 2012).

However, for this project, a slightly larger cohort size was considered, because of the anticipated mixture of interview outcomes. For example, it was expected that a portion of the recruited participants may provide shorter responses as Jourard (1971, p. 35) point out "[t]he male role requires man to appear tough, objective, striving, achieving, unsentimental, and emotionally unexpressive … [hence] Man seems obliged, rather, to hide much of his real self … from himself and from others."

Jourard's observation is particularly fitting to those who lived the gang culture because as Campbell and Hansen (2012) and Sommers et al. (1994) highlight former gang members or

associates might remain reluctant to disclose intimate and sensitive information about themselves as a measure of prevention for any potential repercussions (Campbell & Hansen, 2012; Fleisher & Decker, 2001; van Gemert & Fleisher, 2005).

To overcome this dilemma Robinson (2014) recommends a mix-gender purposive sampling frame but as explained earlier, the criteria to participate was limited to males only. Hence, to mitigate the possibility to preclude the collection of rich, detailed, first-person accounts of experiences by recruiting reserved participants, the decision was made to expand on the sample size and set it to the maximum of 25 cases. The arrangement of this sample size prior to the participant recruitment process was considered appropriate because it would yield substantial data to resolve the main research questions/problems.

The selection of the methodology, decision on an interview structure, formulation of an interview guide, drafting of a sample universe, and definition of the sample size established the foundation of this research project. However, ethical obligations needed to be addressed before the project's practical implementation could proceed.

Ethical Considerations

As this qualitative study was designed to explore participants' subjective experience of gang engagement, gang desistance, and desistance maintenance, it was anticipated that they would disclose emotionally sensitive and potentially illegal information. Consequently, to protect participants, their communities, and the researcher from any potential harm, to ensure the privacy of the participants and culturally appropriate recruitment, interviewing, and data handling and analysis processes, the following key steps were considered in Massey University Human Ethics Committee (MUHEC) application:

Harm Minimisation

For example, in the design stage, to avoid any potentially harmful scenarios like conflict between the research participants (arising from the residue of rival gang affiliation) instead of focus groups, one-on-one online or face-to-face interviews were designed to collect data (Mason, 2018). Further risk minimisation steps were considered for protecting participants' identity and privacy by concealing their original names with pseudonyms and redacting any information from excerpts that could easily identify them (Massey University, 2017). By applying confidentiality and privacy, harm minimisation was assured for both the participants and their immediate circles such as their family members, workplaces, religious organisations, and other wider conventional groups they engaged with (Silverman, 2017).

Safety measures for myself were also considered. For instance, I sourced two phones for the interviews. One to record the interview and the other for security reasons should the interview take a negative turn (Smith et al., 2009). To avoid any potential harm to myself and my family, interviews were to be organised at public venues or participants' workplaces, instead of the participants' or my own home. Prior to and after interviews, my supervisors were to be consulted about anticipated or potential safety issues. For safe keeping, I was to communicate the interview details such as its location and timeframe with my partner (Hopf, 2004).

Informed Consent

To ensure that participants' consent to be interviewed was fully informed and voluntary, before the interview, I was to give or email the participants a copy of the Consent Form (Appendix A) and Information Sheet (Appendix B) which contained detailed information of the research and its process. Moreover, to prevent potential harm to the participants, their communities, and myself, the Participants' Rights and the Criminal Disclosure clauses in the Information Sheet were to be specifically highlighted and discussed in detail, confirming participants' understanding of the interview's purpose and process prior to signing the consent

form (Cieurzo & Keitel, 1999; Smith et al., 2009). Should participants needed to seek support due to experiencing emotional discomfort from recalling and sharing sensitive memories during the interview process, the Information Sheet provided details of 24/7 anonymous helplines such as Anxiety New Zealand Trust, Need to Talk?, and Life Line Aotearoa.

Informed Consent, Privacy, and Confidentiality

For security and privacy reasons, any digitally signed copies of the Consent Forms, personal information, and other digital documents such as the audio-recordings and transcriptions of the interviews were to be saved under the participant's computer file and stored at multiple password protected digital locations such as my computer, external hard-drive, and my account at the Massey University's Microsoft OneDrive cloud-based storage (Massey University, 2017). The hard copies of the Consent Form and the interview transcripts were locked in my cabinet at my house. All hard and digital copy of the collected data and signed documents will be destroyed three years after completion of the doctoral thesis.

Te Tiriti O Waitangi

While the study's participant sampling was not designed to be specific to Māori, due to the large representation of Māori in ANZ gangs (Parliamentary Service, 2022), it was anticipated that several potential participants would whakapapa to Māori. As a qualified and registered social worker, my practice was informed by Te Tiriti o Waitangi principles and a bicultural competent framework, which meant that I had a general knowledge of basic Māori tikanga and kawa.

However, a consultation about this research project was held with the Waikato Kirikiriroa Marae Whaea, Mrs Maria Davis (Mrs Davis) who is an integral member of the local Ngā Kōti Rangatahi (Marae based Youth Court) (Smith, 2021). Mrs Davis had agreed to provide cultural advice or supervision on issues relating to Māori participant interviews and

the data collection process, should the need arise (Massey University, 2017). The signed Evidence of Consultation document is enclosed as Appendix C.

Compensation

For their time, travel, and willingness to share their life stories, participants were to be offered $30 petrol or food vouchers. Food was also to be organised for face-to face interviews. For those participants who were to be interviewed online, the vouchers were to be posted to their nominated postal address.

Ethics Approval

After attending to the recommended emendation in the application form, on 3 November 2022, the full Ethics Approval (application number: SOB 22/36) was granted by Massey University Southern B Committee (Appendix D). As an integral component of the entire project, the ethical considerations significantly influenced the methods of recruiting participants, organising and conducting interviews, the process of transcribing, handling of data, transcriptions, and consent forms, and the type of participants' personal information used in the data analysis. The following section details the practical application of the study's ethical considerations and designed research methods.

Putting the Methods Into Practice

This section presents the research methods practical use, which began with a strategic approach to participant recruitment. As participants were recruited meetings were set up to conduct interviews and the data collection process began. The audio-recorded interviews were manually transcribed, and participants' sensitive personal information was carefully managed to avoid breaching the study's confidentiality and privacy obligations. While the manual transcription incepted the data analysis process, to formulate the final theme structure IPA's six

steps were applied. To conclude this chapter, a discussion outlines how in the findings chapters the figures complement and aid the interpretation of themes, categories, and life phases.

Participant Recruitment Strategies

Participant recruitment began shortly after the application was approved by MUHEC. Following Hamilton and Bowers' (2006) suggestion about finding a substantial number of participants within a relatively short period, I contacted the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW). As a member I could request the agency to place the research Advertisement (Appendix E) form on their website and in their fortnightly newsletters. Furthermore, to accelerate the recruitment process, I began to directly contact and sent out the Request Letter (Appendix F) to social sector agencies and self-support groups, which I knew that employed reformed gang members in a helping profession capacity.

While Abrams (2010) views agency targeting a form of convenience sampling, since this strategy requires less effort to locate suitable participants, Devers and Frankel (2000) caution that this approach may produce mixed results. Researchers using this method, rely on the discretion of agency managers or so-called gatekeepers to grant access for participant recruitment. Indeed, while initially curious and wanting to know more about the purpose of the study, in some instances gatekeepers would decline my request to approach their staff.

Although these strategies initially seemed to be promising to capture potential participants' interest, the recruitment process only moderately progressed. To address these complications, I sought assistance from my supervisors and the study's cultural advisor, Mrs Davies. They recommended that instead of targeting specific agencies, I should reconnect with former social sector colleagues who could vouch for my professional integrity. For recruiting Māori participants, my mutual connection with these primary contacts proven to be a salient factor to consider and accept my invitation to the interview.

Additionally, I also adjusted the use of language to attract potential participants for the interviews. Instead of using formal terms, I started applying a more casual dialect at the time of contacting and setting up meetings with the respondents. For example, I replaced the term of interview/interviewing which has the connotation of interrogation, evaluation, and a set of rigid agenda with words like discussion, talk, catch up, and kōrero and rather than directly referring to an invitation for a meeting, I began to use alternative phrases like grabbing a lunch or having something to eat while we are having a kōrero.

I also followed Goodman's (1961) strategy and at the end of each interview, I asked the participant if they could refer their contacts who may meet participant criteria. Spreen (1992) and Faugier and Sargeant (1997) recommend this commonly known sampling method as snowballing for studies targeting a cohort that is unlikely to respond to research advertisements due to the sensitive nature of the research topic or because they belong to a hard-to-reach population (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Heckathorn, 1997; Robinson, 2014). With the help of this sampling strategy, I managed to access participants' networks and recruit several potential participants. However, as the recruitment map demonstrates in Appendix G, the other two such as convenience and primary contact sampling methods also substantially contributed to finding 27 suitable participants (Hendriks & Blanken, 1992; Johnston & Sabin, 2010).

Although, in the design phase, the maximum number of the cohort was set at 25, two potential participants who agreed to be interviewed requested to put our meetings on hold due to personal commitments. These two participants later advised about their availability and requested to partake in the research. By that time, I reached the desired cohort size and stopped actively looking for potential participants. I also contacted ANZASW to remove the research advertisement signalling that the participants recruitment process had come to an end. However, as a result of one of the interviewed participants opting to fully withdraw and I was still transcribing rather than analysing other interviews, I decided to interview these

participants. Both interviews were invaluable as participants provided vital information that strengthened the research findings. In total, 26 former gang members shared their life stories offering unique insights into their experience of gang socialisation, gang exit, and stigma.

Research Participants

As the participant recruitment progressed a demographic and geographic statistical profile of the participants evolved, which is largely summarised in Table 4. 1. However, to align with the MUHEC approval and cultural principles concerning the protection of participants' and their communities' mana, pseudonyms were selected to minimise participants' identifiability. Additionally, excerpts from transcriptions were amended to exclude easily recognisable personal characteristics and traits. In addition, instead of individually, participants are introduced in a group format to further blur their publishable personal information and to ensure adherence to MUHEC's confidentiality requirements.

Age is identified as one of the most prominent factors in gang desistance (Laub et al., 1998; Laub & Sampson, 1993; Maruna, 1999), and it also played a critical role in shaping participants' responses. It was observed that, the older participants tended to have more established standing in the conventional society. As depicted in Table 4. 1, participant ages ranged from 20s to late 70s, with the majority being between 30 and 39 years old. Another significant contributing factor to desistance progress was participants' relationship and fatherhood status. Although most participants reported to be married, some were in de facto or live-apart-together[47] relationship. Besides three, all participants had one or more children.

It was recognised that my own geographical situatedness and connections in the wider Waikato region greatly influenced the location in which participants were recruited. Hence,

[47]The term describes couples who maintain a committed intimate relationship while residing in separate homes.

most recruited participants resided on the ANZ North Island, and their communities determined their affiliation with a particular gang.

As noted earlier in Chapter One (p. 20), the most recent report from Parliamentary Service (2022) shows that the majority of gang members belong to ANZ's two largest Māori ethnic gangs the Mongrel Mob and the Black Power. The participants' former gang affiliation was in parallel with the statistical data and the majority of the cohort reported to have formerly associated or retained ties with one of these gangs. The rest of the participants were former members of outlaw motorcycle clubs or white supremacist gangs (skinheads).

In terms of ethnicities, most participants identified as Māori. The high number of Māori participations was partly the result of the high Māori membership rate in gangs, the larger population of Māori on the North Island in comparison to the South Island, and Mrs Davis' invaluable cultural advice to approach and locate potential participants through go-betweens. The strong kinship bonds and family-like structure of gangs also affected gang membership status. After exiting the gang, only a small number of participants achieved what Pyrooz and Decker (2011) define as true desistance. However, a significant portion of the cohort retained an honorary membership and fit Pyrooz and Decker's (2011) typology of OGs/veteranos[48]. Additionally, a large percentage of the participants maintained social connections with members of their respective gang.

While the following information is excluded from Table 4. 1, it is essential to address them to provide additional insights into some of the factors which triggered participants' gang socialisation, challenges faced during the process of gang exit, and accomplishment of conventional roles. Over two-thirds of the participants experienced childhood adversities such as being raised in a single parent household and being exposed to verbal and physical violence

[48]In Chapter Two (p. 39) a detailed explanation is offered on OGs/veteranos type of gang membership.

during upbringing. These participants attributed these hardships to critically influencing their decision to join the gang.

Over the years of gang engagement, some participants assumed leadership positions (like gang president, sergeant of arm, and treasurer), while others remained patched members (or foot soldiers) or prospects (working towards receiving the patch). The diversity in gang membership status allowed for observation of differences in participants' length of stay in the gang, retention of honorary membership, and gang disengagement difficulties.

Lastly, participants' occupations were faith or helping sector based. Although these roles frequently overlapped, more participants were employed, studying, or volunteering in the social sector compared to the faith-based sector. While participants' employment or volunteer positions in social sectors included counsellor, mentor, social or community workers, faith workers were qualified as pastors or ministers according to their denomination's standards.

Table 4. 1

Participants' Demographic and Geographic Characteristics

#	Pseudonym	Age Band	Ethnicity	Relationship	Fatherhood	Maintaining Desistance	Location	Affiliation
1.	Afa	60-69	Pasifika	Married	Yes	>10 years	N. Island	Social Connection
2.	Ānaru	30-39	Māori	Single	No	5 -10 years	N. Island	Social Connection
3.	Frank	60-69	European	Married	Yes	>20 years	S. Island	True Desister
4.	Hamiora	30-39	Māori	Married	Yes	5-10 years	N. Island	OG/Veterano
5.	Heta	40-49	Māori	Married	Yes	5-10 years	N. Island	True Desister
6.	Ihaka	30-39	Māori	Married	Yes	>10 years	N. Island	Social Connection
7.	Iwi	30-39	Māori	Married	Yes	5-10 years	N. Island	Social Connection
8.	Kaha	30-39	Māori	Single	No	5-10 years	N. Island	Social Connection
9.	Kaia	60-69	Māori	Single	Yes	> 20 years	N. Island	Social Connection
10.	Kaperiere	30-39	Māori	Married	Yes	5-10 years	N. Island	True Desister
11.	Manu	50-59	Māori	Married	Yes	>10 years	N. Island	OG/Veterano
12.	Mehaka	30-39	Māori	Relationship	No	1-5 years	S. Island	Social Connection
13.	Patrick	70-79	European	Married	Yes	>20 years	N. Island	OG/Veterano
14.	Pene	40-49	Māori	Single	Yes	>10 years	N. Island	True Desister
15.	Piri	50-59	Māori	Married	Yes	>10 years	N. Island	OG/Veterano
16.	Piripi	60-69	Māori	Married	Yes	5-10 years	N. Island	True Desister
17.	Rawiri	40-49	Māori	Relationship	Yes	5-10 years	N. Island	OG/Veterano
18.	Roa	70-79	Māori	Single	Yes	>20 years	N. Island	Social Connection
19.	Ropata	30-39	Māori	Married	Yes	5-10 years	N. Island	OG/Veterano
20.	Ruka	50-59	Māori	Married	Yes	>10 years	N. Island	OG/Veterano
21.	Tane	20-29	Māori	Married	Yes	1-5 years	S. Island	True Desister
22.	Taki	40-49	Māori	Married	Yes	5-10 years	N. Island	OG/Veterano
23.	Tāmati	70-79	Māori	Married	Yes	>20 years	N. Island	Social Connection
24.	Toatoa	50-59	Māori	Married	Yes	5-10 years	N. Island	Social Connection
25.	Toko	70-79	Māori	Widow	Yes	>20 years	N. Island	OG/Veterano
26.	Whiunui	60-69	Māori	Married	Yes	>10 years	N. Island	OG/Veterano

Organising and Conducting Interviews

After assessing the potential participant's suitability for the research, the Participant Information Sheet and the Interview Guide (Appendix H) were either emailed or given out as hard copies to those who met participant criteria. Following Padgett's (2017) recommendations, the Participant Information Sheet contained details of my role as a Massey University student researcher, a general description of the study and its procedures, and participants' rights. In line with the study's ethical obligations, participants were informed that the interview would be audio-recorded, and that they could pause or stop the recording and ask questions at any time during the interview. Participants were also advised that they would receive the verbatim transcription of the recording with the option to add, change, delete, or withdraw any part, or all their interview content before data analysis commenced.

In line with Te Tiriti o Waitangi principles Pānuitanga (partnership), Whai Wāhi (participation), and Tino Rangatiratanga (Self-determination), after the participant agreed to be interviewed with their family, work, and other life commitments carefully considered, meetings were organised at a time and a place that was convenient for the participant. Despite the participants' reformed identity and my long service experience in the social work field (homeless shelter, reintegration, and youth justice social worker) which taught me how to recognise and deescalate any verbal or physical threat, due to the sensitive nature of the topic, my safety also had to be considered.

In total, seventeen face-to-face meetings were set up, primarily with those participants who lived on the upper parts of the North Island. Eight of the face-to-face meetings were arranged around noon and held at public places such as cafés or eateries. Participants welcomed the manaakitanga to have our meeting at a café or an eatery, but to adhere to the Whakamarumartia (active protection) principle of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, careful consideration was taken at the selection of a table, being aware of the sensitive nature of our discussion.

While, having a meeting at a public place allowed ample time to conduct interviews and easy access to food and drinks, the quality of two audio-recordings were compromised by the background noise.

The rest of the in-person meetings took place at the clients' work places, during or after work hours. Food was also offered and where accepted, provided for these meetings. The interviews were held at a private office room, where the participant could openly answer the research questions and talk about their experiences without the unease of being interrupted. Due to the time limit, the workplace-based interviews became more structured. While, this minimised the collection of irrelevant information or what Morse and Field (1996) and Smith et al. (2008) refer to as the interview's dross rate, it also restricted participants from fully sharing their experiences, potentially limiting the richness of data.

Due to the participants' dispersed geographical locations, eight meetings took place via Zoom, Skype, or Teams and two were fully conducted over the phone. Typically, online meetings were set up with participants who resided on the Southern parts of the North Island or on the South Island. While the online meeting was a convenient method to gather data, because I could conduct it from my home when my family members were not present and the participant was also alone, complications with the internet service resulted in needing to restart the interview. This not only interrupted the flow and shortened the length of the interview process, but also impacted on interview quality. Although in the three recordings (including the two from cafés) with compromised audio quality, some words were inaudible, participants' verification confirmed that the missing words did not over all affect the quality of data.

After conducting a few interviews, I noticed that most of the participants were not interested or lacked time to read the entire Information Sheet and the Interview Guide prior to our meeting. Consequently, part-way through the participant recruitment process, at the time of organising subsequent interviews, I began to inquire whether participants were interested in

receiving a copy of the Information Sheet and the Interview Guide before we met, or they preferred to go through those documents together. In most instances, participants opted to discussing the details of the Information Sheet and the Interview Guide at our meeting. These participants were given hard copies of both documents and were offered to have the documents emailed to them, should they decide to receive soft copies in the future. Since these documents were provided and their contents were discussed before the interviews began, the ethical obligations of the data collection process were not breached. After going through the contents of the Information Sheet with participants, I specifically highlighted the clauses of Participants' Rights and the Criminal Disclosure to ensure they understood both their rights and my obligations. By signing the Consent Form, they demonstrated that they were fully informed about the research procedure.

Regarding the collection of potential information about criminal involvement, Totten (2001) and Faleolo (2014) strongly recommend informing participants before the interview that the researcher's obligation is to report any unaddressed criminal activities, or other risks to public safety. This can avert uncomfortable situations and ensure the safety of participants, the community, and researchers. Following the authors' suggestions and adhering to the ethical requirements, the Criminal Disclosure clause was thoroughly discussed before the audio-recorded interview commenced, regardless of whether the participants had or had not read the Information Sheet prior to our meeting. This proved beneficial, as during interviews when I sensed that participants were about to disclose potentially compromising information, I intervened by reminding them of this clause, and we mutually agreed to change the topic.

The semi-structured interview style produced interviews with varying lengths. While some interviews lasted 90 minutes, others were finalised in around 40 minutes. However, meetings occasionally proceeded over 2 hours, incorporating non-audio-recorded whanaungatanga about our mutual contacts and informal discussion about participants'

contacts who may fit participant criteria. During these informal talks, at times the course of the conversation took a turn and topic relevant issues emerged. When I sensed our discussion was returning to topic related subjects, with the participant's permission the audio-recorder was switched back on and the interview resumed.

Handling of Data, Transcriptions, and Consent Forms and the Process of Transcribing

In line with the cultural principle of kaitiakitanga (protection) and the MUHEC's ethical guidelines, after each interview, the audio-recordings alongside the digital and the digitalised copies of the signed Consent Form were uploaded onto my password protected computer and added to the participant's computer file. Additionally, for safe-keeping and ease of recovery, audio-recordings and documents were stored in multiple digital locations such as on a password protected external hard-drive and at Massey University's Microsoft OneDrive cloud-based storage. Hard copies of the Consent Form were stored in a locked cabinet at my house. The audio-recordings were listened to only by me, and the password to the digital locations and the key to the cabinet was accessible only to me.

In line with Smith and Osborn's (2008) and Smith and Shinebourne's (2012) suggestion, I transcribed the audio file verbatim to create a semantic record of each interview. This means that the transcript contained every word that the participant and I spoke. At the time of signing the Consent Form, participants were advised that to represent their views in the final report extracts from the interview transcripts were to be selected. For this reason, it was critical that transcriptions were accurate representations of the participants' stories.

To ensure that I achieved accuracy, and participants were comfortable with the transcript content, I asked the participants to review their hard copy or emailed interview transcripts. Participants were given two weeks to return the transcript with their recommendation to edit or delete some parts or advise their decision to withdraw the whole

content. The transcripts and their reviewed version were attached to the participants' computer files, which like other documents were uploaded onto various digital locations for safe storage.

To maintain kaitiakitanga over, rather than employing a transcriber or using a digital software like Otter AI, I opted to manually transcribe the audio-recordings. While this method required me to relisten to the audio-recordings several times, the procedure enabled me to immerse and familiarise myself with the participants' stories. Moreover, this in-depth engagement with the audio-recordings established the groundwork for the data analysis process as after transcribing several interviews some potential but rudimentary themes from the raw data began to gleam through.

Data Analysis

As a novice to IPA, I followed Smith et al.'s (2009) and Pietkiewicz and Smith's (2014) six step-by-step analytical process, which, as noted earlier, I began during the transcription of the audio-recordings. Hence, when I selected Heta's life story as the first case to examine, I already had considerable familiarity with his story. Nevertheless, I carefully read his transcript again. With every rereading, I paid closer attention to his detailed and complex narrations of his life experiences in an attempt to draw out relevant details to the research questions.

While reading Heta's transcript, I simultaneously began the second step, which entailed colour coding and annotating the text. First, by using different colours I systemically highlighted certain sections of the transcript that appeared significant and relevant to the research questions. For example, the colour green signalled connection with research question number one. Besides colour coding, I also included elementary explanatory notes. These comments outlined my initial thoughts about similarities, differences, and contradictions within Heta's transcript. However, with further reading a more in-depth interpretation of the data resulted a shift to focus on my personal reflection on Heta's overarching sense-making of his gang socialisation, gang exit, and the maintenance of gang desistance.

The colour coding and my annotation produced a substantial amount of usable information, which, in the third step, I began to saturate into a more manageable volume. This involved breaking up the main data set by pulling out fragments of transcripts and explanatory notes. To organise these excerpts, I opened new Word files for each relevance group and set up series of individual columns. The data extracts and my notes were copied into individual columns which were considered to share similar features. An example of colour coding, initial noting, and the development of categories and themes are provided in Appendix I.

For instance, the section in Heta's transcript that discusses his struggle with fatherlessness was copied into one of the columns that represented Heta's perception of stigma and attraction to gang stemming from this particular life experience. Other life experiences perceived to generate stigmatisation and gang socialisation, such as Heta's school environment and upbringing were also arranged within this relevant group but into their own individual columns. The intention of this systemic data organisation was to generate possible themes, and to indicate connections between them.

With my attention turning to establish theme clusters or categories, I entered Smith et al.'s (2009) fourth step of data analysis. In an effort to generate a logical pattern, I decided to refine the themes and their categories into a chronological order, which somewhat followed the order of the research questions and illuminated the basic notion of hermeneutic interpretation: "where the part is interpreted in relation to the whole; the whole is interpreted in relation to the part" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 92). Consequently, structuring the themes in this manner demonstrated Heta's overall understanding of his own experiences, which were like building blocks connected together and ever propelled him towards making a decision to enter, then exit the gang-centric life phase and incept a new life phase of gang desistance maintenance.

The generation of this preliminary thematic framework, or what Smith and Osborn (2008) describe as a table or figure of themes concluded the first case analysis. Although this theme

structure is unique to Heta's life story, it served as a template for the analysis of remaining cases. The fifth step involved analysing subsequent cases by applying the same analytical steps. Excerpts from the subsequent cases, which shared similar features to Heta's were arranged under the existing themes. At the same time, extracts with different characteristics but an innate relevance to the category were organised in new themes.

For example, in the first findings chapter's category of Preliminary Offending distinguishes between serious antisocial behaviour before and after gang entry. In Rawiri's instance severe delinquency began prior to joining the gang, while Heta's offending behaviour started to escalate post-gang engagement. However, for both participants this continued lifestyle gave rise to their identification as a gang member.

Due to the study's larger sample size, each excerpt was tagged with the corresponding pseudonym to able track and preserve participants' voices. Additionally, in the analysis of subsequent cases, my explanatory notes became less detailed, shifting my focus to locating diverging and converging patterns across cases.

After analysing each transcript, a considerable amount of extracts were collated and organised into themes. To refine the themes into a manageable size, only the most descriptive extracts were selected to portray the meaning of the theme. This saturation process, which included theme reconfiguration, discarding, splitting, or collapsing improved categorisation.

The systemic rearrangement of themes across the cases moved the analysis to the final step of IPA, which led to the production of an overarching thematic structure. Although, the analysis of subsequent cases considerably extended, the final theme structure or the thematic map reflected the three phases of Heta's age-differentiated life span; namely gang entry, gang exit, and maintenance of criminal gang desistance.

Guidance to the Final Theme Structure

Figure 4. 1 is designed to provide a visual aid to how final theme structure's three primary life phase (marked with blue) and their corresponding categories (highlighted with purple) link to each other and transition from one to another. Due to the content size, the life phases are individually addressed in the following three findings chapters. Each findings chapter begins with the introduction of the overall life phase and its corresponding categories, which are represented in a parent figure. Within each life phase, the individual categories seek to illustrate the key events and circumstances that continuously stimulated participants to enter or exit a specific phase of their life course.

As portrayed in Figure 4. 2, the categories are further split into themes (displayed in red) and subthemes[49] (shown in green). Like categories within their respective parent figures, themes are also linked to each other in their respective categories to illustrate how the seemingly less significant but still a stimulating life experience propelled participants to be active actors in altering the course of their lives. Consequently, themes elaborate on the topic of categories, and categories add up to demonstrate a continuum of change not only within their life phases but across participants' life trajectories. This inseparable linkage between themes, categories, and life phases within the participants' accounts emerged through IPA's hermeneutic focus on understanding the interplay between the part and the whole and culminated in the findings presented in the following three chapters.

[49]Due to scope and clarity reasons not all themes and subthemes are included in Figure 4. 1. Instead, the Adoption of Gang Member Identity category is marked with black and extracted into Figure 4. 2 to demonstrate how themes and subthemes are sequenced to explicate the category's overall concept.

Figure 4. 1

The Structure of Thematic Map

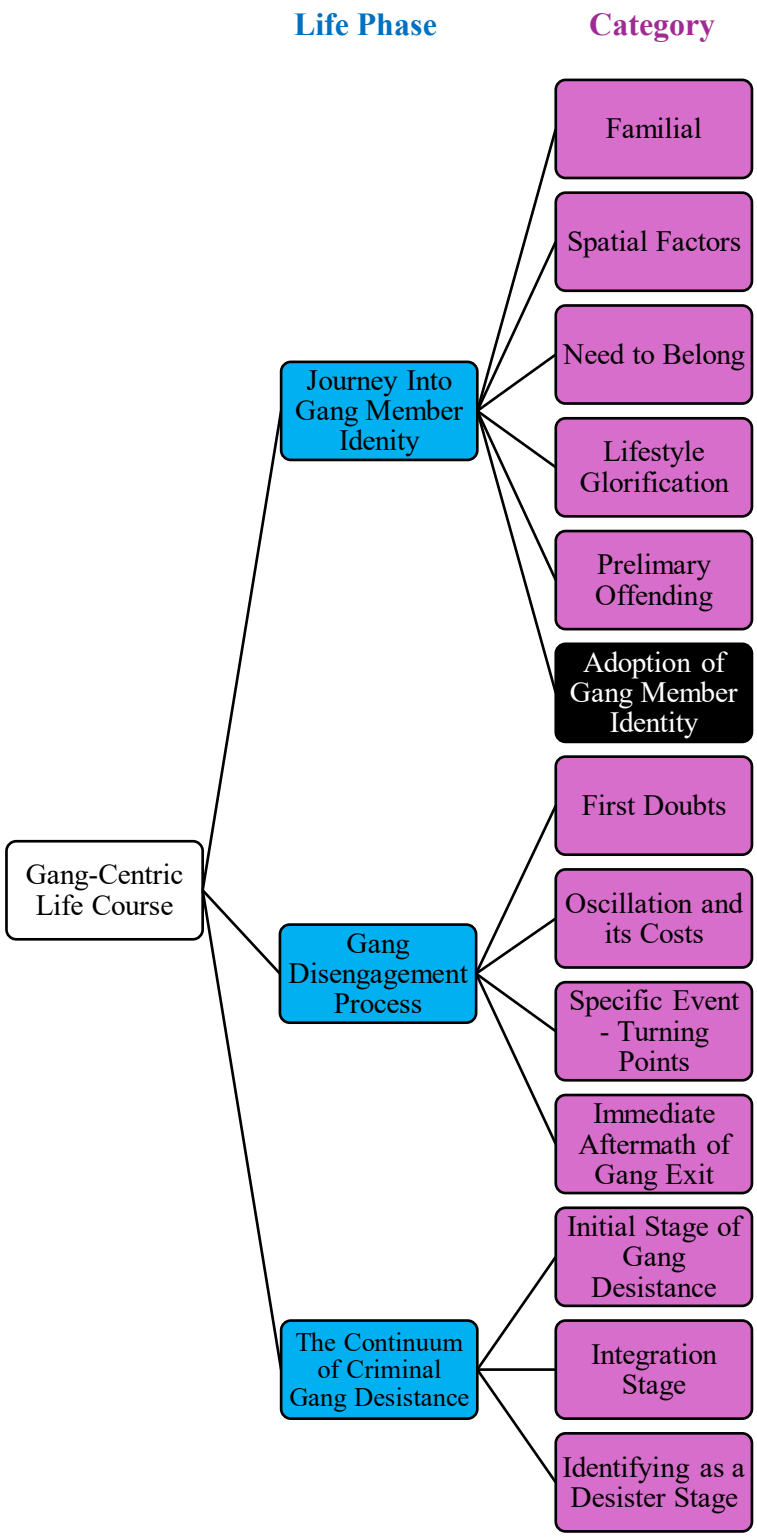
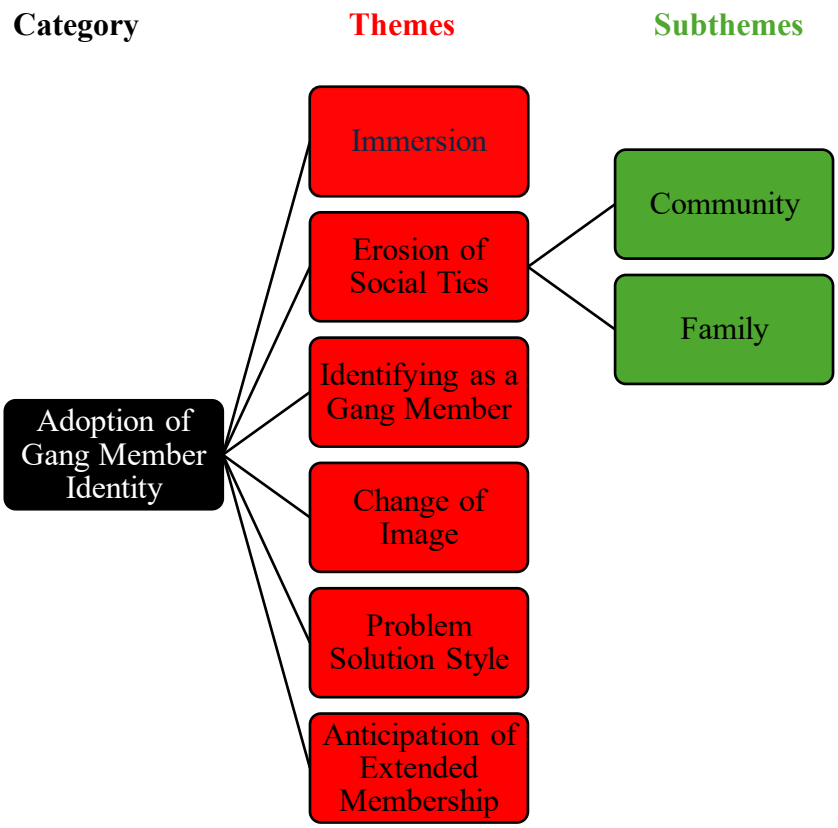


Figure 4. 2

The Structure of a Category



Conclusion

This chapter introduced the study's methodology and methods in two separate sections. The first section presented how the qualitative approach and IPA influenced the research design, my position in the research, and my reflections on IPA's strengths and limitations. The second section discussed the design and application of the methods, outlined the ethical considerations, and described the steps of interpretive phenomenological data analysis. Finally, by introducing and explaining the theme structure and its visual representations, the chapter sets the stage for the following three findings chapters. The first of these chapters presents the participants' experiences that drove the formulation of their gang member identity.

Chapter Five

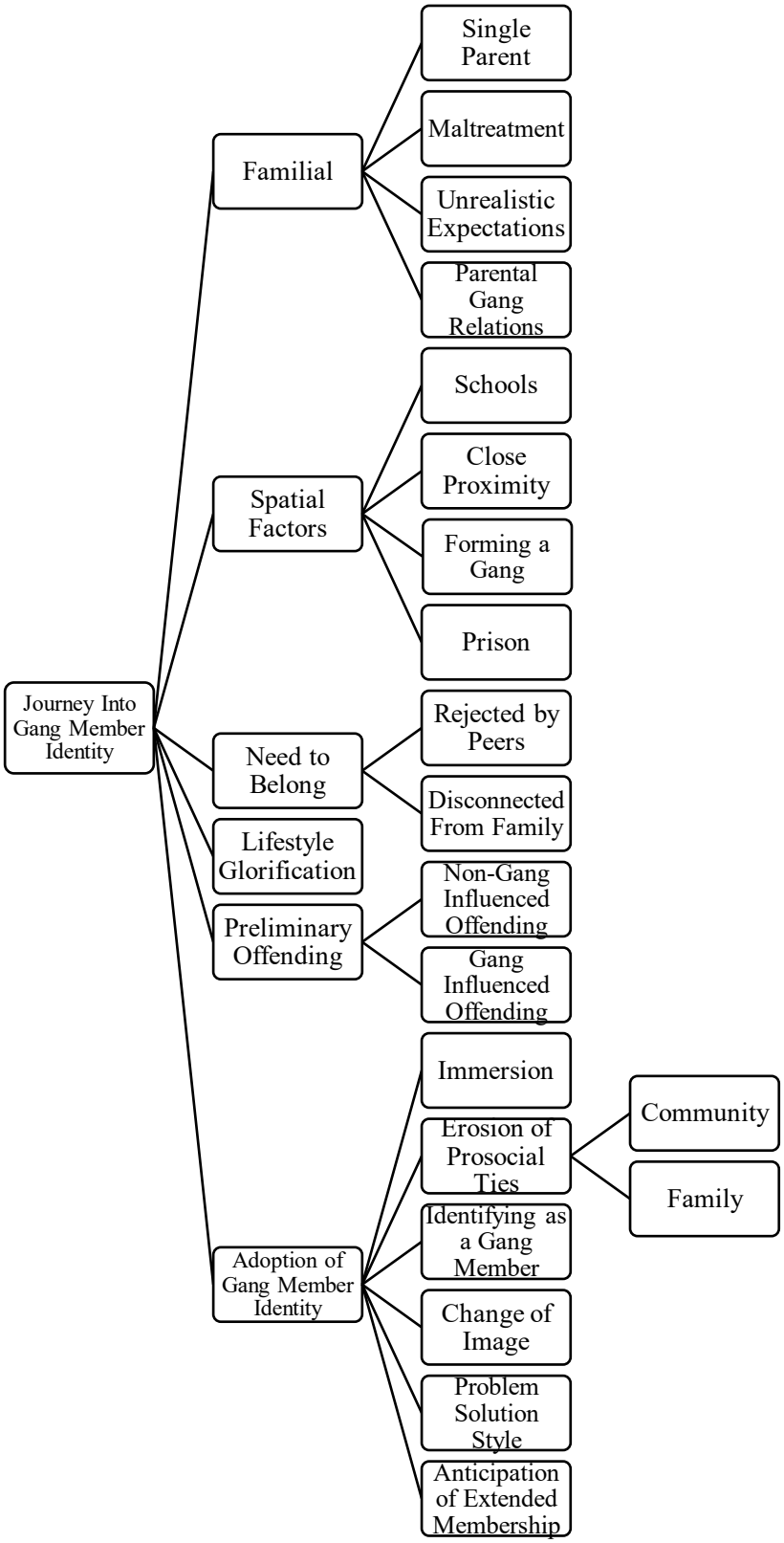
Journey Into Gang Member Identity

This first chapter of findings aims to bring attention to specific experiences, which participants identified as causes for affiliation and, consequently, entrenchment into the gang-centric lifestyle. Although some participants were less open to talk about their childhood experiences in detail, every participant, at least to some extent, viewed those experiences, whether familial or spatial, as contributing elements to their eventual gang membership. As presented in Figure 5. 1, these significant life events are organised (though often interconnected) into six major categories namely familial, spatial factors, need to belong, lifestyle glorification, preliminary offending, and adoption of gang member identity.

The familial category comprises of themes such as single parent household, maltreatment, parental gang relations, and unrealistic expectations. The spatial risk factors category is also divided into themes to convey a holistic picture of how broader community contexts like schools, prisons, and neighbourhoods facilitated gang engagement. The category of need to belong illuminates participants' perception of peer rejection and family disconnectedness. These experiences generated participants' gang glorification and resulted in their preliminary offending behaviours pre- and post-gang entry. The final category concerning the adoption of a gang member identity highlights the gang's social grip, through which participants' immersion in the gang life eroded non-gang family and community ties, altered their appearance and demeanour, and fostered anticipation of extended membership.

Figure 5. 1

Contributing Factors to Gang Member Identity Development

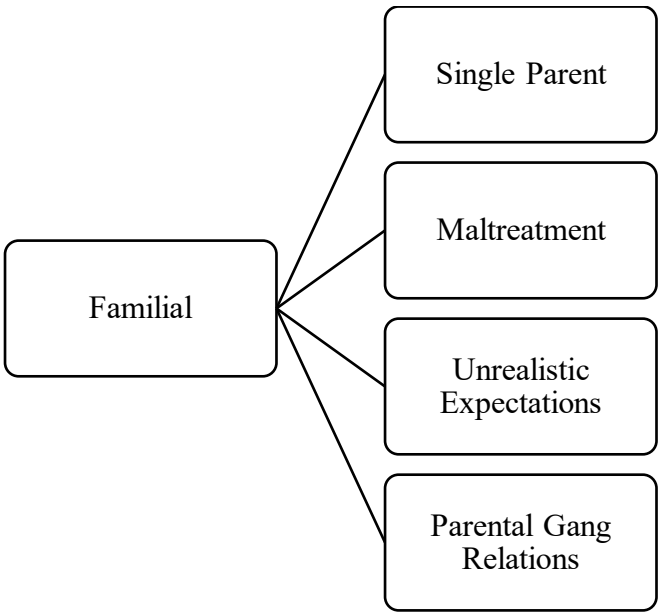


Familial Circumstances

Participants identified various childhood risk factors within their home environment, which propelled them towards their later stage gang affiliation. Several participants articulated that growing up in a single parent household, typically with their father absent, left them without a family member who modelled prosocial masculine behaviour. Other critical experiences centred around parental maltreatment (physical, verbal, and neglect). Participants generally associated their parents' or caregivers' childrearing deficits (harsh discipline and poor supervision) with their caregivers' personal complexities which included substance abuse, mental health problems, and unreasonable expectations. However, the most salient factor that directly and instantaneously linked participants to the gang lifestyle was their parents' or other significant family members' gang involvement. As illustrated in Figure 5. 2, this section presents participants' diverse family experiences as underlying factors to gang entry.

Figure 5. 2

Family Circumstances as Underlying Factors for Gang Membership



Single Parent Household

Abandonment by fathers was a common experience among participants. For example, early on, Heta was faced with the adversity of being fatherless. The absent father figure intensified Heta's vigilance and desperate search for a male role model, who could provide a sense of security, reinforce masculine behaviours and identity and, most importantly, be someone he could laud as a father. As Heta's forthcoming comments demonstrate, his experience of fatherlessness was a critical factor in his early teenage delinquency, and it continued to impact on his socialisation and parenting style into his adulthood.

When I was born, my mum'd just come out of a divorce … so like I was fatherless. I remember it like yesterday, I was around 5 years old, I just started going to school, I noticed dads dropping their kids off. I was like: Oh mum, I don't want you to drop me off tomorrow, I want dad to. She says: Dad won't be dropping you off. I was like: What do you mean? She says: No, your dad will never drop you off, you will never see your dad again. That sort of information at five, it rocked me and then the next day, I went to school I was like watching, then I remember it gave me a profound focus on other men with their children … everywhere I looked, I saw these dads, and I had this hypersensitive focus, and it was so upsetting. So I was like, I was looking for somebody now.

Tāmati also experienced similar emotional turbulence during his childhood. Brought up in a large traditional Māori whānau, Tāmati built up a sense of resentment for being shunned and ignored by his parents. First, he was disconnected from his father and mainly *"brought up [in a] single parent"* household, then he lost connection with his mother for a period, when he was whangai by his aunt and uncle. Losing parental connection was crucial at generating Tāmati's anger "*because [he] always felt growing up no-one cared"* after his *"mum and dad*

split up", and *"then [he] had to live with [his] uncle and aunty."* This sense of abandonment was an important ingredient for increasing Tāmati's helplessness and later his yearning to belong to a family-like group where he felt connected.

Other participants articulated that having been brought up by a single parent led to limited control in their home. For instance, Ihaka pointed out that his mother *"as a single mum"* kept her large family financially afloat by assisting her brothers in gang activities. Despite the advantage of this lucrative venture her actions set off a series of complications in Ihaka's home setting. Because they *"didn't have a dad, there wasn't really much alarm bells going off at [their] whare to say: Look at this!"* Here, Ihaka refers to his mother's gang connections, and criminal gang activities.

Other participants, like Tane recalled that although his *"mum always supported [him] with what [he] did, because she knew [he] would do it anyway,"* his father *"definitely wouldn't have approved"* of his behaviour or eventual entry into the gang had he not passed away when Tane was only a child. As a result of his mother's permissive and neglectful parenting style, Tane reported that he *"pretty much ended up growing up in boys' homes."* He reflected: *"I guess for me it [joining the gang] was a family sort of thing"* referring to the combination of missing male role model and his mother's limited parenting capacity.

By the time Rawiri was "*about 9 years old"* his mother and the man who he *"thought was [his] biological father had split up."* As a solo parent, Rawiri's mother struggled to manage his behaviour, as he*, "kinda fell off and went the wrong kinda way"* becoming *"a bit of a criminal and quite disrespectful to [his] elders."* Consequently, by 12, Rawiri *"ended up in CYFS care"* and like Tane he was also *"in and out of foster care."* Temporary separation from immediate family, coupled with exposure to other delinquent youths and their activities, as discussed in the upcoming themes, set in motion his interest in further delinquency.

Growing up in a non-intact family home unbalanced participants. The lack of security generated a sense of helplessness about their familial circumstances. This manifested in resentment and a quest of finding male role models or a substitute family. In addition, most participants who grew up in solo parent households regarded their home environment as inadequate in providing effective parental control over their escalating antisocial behaviour, which, in some instances, attracted statutory attention. Although being raised in non-intact families was influential, parental discipline that rested on maltreatment and punitive practices were equally crucial in participants' involvement in delinquency. The next section focuses on those experiences that describe participants' exposure to parental abuse.

Maltreatment (Physical and Verbal Abuse, and Neglect)

Adverse childhood experiences like severe physical abuse, were frequently recalled and shared during the interviews. In most cases participants suffered from their fathers' harsh discipline though other significant family members' autocratic parenting style also impacted on their upbringing. The experience of physical and verbal abuse was seen as a form of desensitisation and as resilience enhancement to street violence and other conflict. For instance, Rawiri justified that "*growing up and getting hidings was normal back then,"* but simultaneously he attributed his escalating delinquent tendencies to his *"stepfather's violence"* and abusive parenting style "*before he had left"* the household.

During the interview, Frank occasionally became self-questioning about what might have triggered his father to become a substance abuser and a bully towards his mother, brothers, and him. He expressed confusion given that his paternal extended family members held well-respected occupations in their community. The following excerpt provides a glimpse into Frank's reflections on his father's lifestyle and the negative way it impacted on Frank's childhood experiences.

My father, came home Thursday night, Friday night, Saturday night [drunk], he was drinking till Sunday morning. He was quite abusive and first of all, I have got it [being abused].

While the previous participants reported harsh punishment by their fathers, Tāmati and Heta were physically abused after having been whangai or relocated into the care of extended family members. As Tāmati shared earlier, the sense of parental abandonment sparked deep resentment and anger, his aunt's discipline, who "*beat the living day light out of"* him further reinforced his perception of "*no-one cared."* "*[B]ecause of that mentality"* Tāmati felt unimportant and admitted he became someone who *"didn't care either"*.

Heta's resentment stemmed from the helplessness he felt about growing up fatherless and also about his mother's "*mental illnesses, as well as physical"* issue, which made her *"very disconnected, very more worrying about herself."* Her inability to effectively regulate Heta's growing anger led to the escalation of his physically violent behaviour. The combination of his mother's capacity to understand and manage his son's behavioural problems attracted the attention of Child Youth and Family Care and Protection Services. To prevent Heta from being made a ward of the state, his mother organised him to be placed with his uncle and aunt. Reflecting on his living arrangement, Heta shared:

I pretty much got dropped in hell ... They weren't associated with gangs, but my uncle and aunty had been in violence from their parents, so it was intergenerational. They were really violent eh ... I felt cold and I felt stuck. I just wanted to go home, I just wanted to go to my mum, I was terrified ... that's where I learnt, that was my breeding ground, my training ground ...

Participants often attributed their insensitivity to violence to the exposure to harsh discipline (often severe physical abuse) in their family homes. The desensitisation of violent

behaviour was crucial in easing participants' assimilation into the gang lifestyle. However, participants' vivid memories of childhood hurdles were not limited to the experience of punishment. Unreasonable parental expectations placed on the participants also contributed to an eroding relationship between participants and their parents, which gave rise to insecurities.

Unrealistic Expectations

Alongside poor parental supervision and harsh discipline, participants also linked their delinquent behaviours to their parents' and carers' unrealistic expectations. For instance, Taki and Afa felt they had to escape from the clutches of their parents' overwhelming control. Despite Taki being raised in an intact family, his continued exposure to parental berating drove him to seek acceptance outside his family, where he found a tolerant father figure, someone Taki could look up to.

I found out that one of my biggest problems, when I was young, was that I never really thought I was good enough for my parents because they were like real fucking straight … [and] because I am an only child. So, for me the boss or president was like a father figure to me because, I didn't get that from him [his own father] so I took a shine to him. I liked his mannerism, I liked everything about him, and I didn't wanna be a [gang] member or whatever, because I loved the [gang]. I wanted to be a gang member, because I loved him and I wanted to be like him, and so I've always had that in my mindset.

Like Taki, Afa also construed his parents' strict oversight and control as their dissatisfaction with him. As he yearned for parental tolerance and flexibility, he turned to his peers to fulfill his need for social connections, acceptance, and understanding. When Afa and his friends established a gang[50], he began to utilise the group as an escape from his family.

[50]More explanation is offered on Afa's gang membership in the forthcoming Forming a Gang theme (p. 138).

I always look back, and I just think: In reality, they just wanted the best for us. But it was too much, instead of them say: OK, if you think that's the right move then you will have a go at it. It was their way or no way at all … mainly my dad, he was in control of my life and to get out of that environment I was just being naughty and trying to go to jail to get away from home.

Participants' struggles with the rigid parental control and high expectations clearly articulated a longing for a compassionate parental figure. To escape the overwhelming feeling of not being *"good enough"* (Taki), participants sought support from peers, who often shared similar backgrounds. Thus, those participants who experienced adverse family events gradually gravitated towards gangs, while others, born into gang affiliated families were immediately predisposed to adopt the lifestyle.

Parental Gang Relations

For participants born into families where parents or other significant family members were part of or affiliated with gangs, gang membership was seamlessly transmitted across generations. Being able to observe and absorb the gang's norms and values from a young age profoundly determined participants' views on gangs. Unlike those participants who turned to gangs in search of a substitute family or a refuge from overly punitive and unrealistic parenting style, these participants were inescapably predisposed through their family ties.

As Ihaka previously pointed out, his mother's vested pecuniary interest in her brothers' gang activities meant the gang lifestyle *"was something that was a part of [their] family."* This shaped his early admiration for gang life and inspired him to follow his uncle's footsteps. Similarly, others like Manu, whose "*mother and two sisters were associated with the gang,"* Tāmati, who *"followed his older brothers,"* and Whiunui and Iwi, who grew up with their gang affiliated older cousins and uncles demonstrated how familial ties can influence future

aspirations toward gang involvement. As Iwi put it: *"being in that environment pretty much just made me think that's what [the gang] I am gonna do when I get older."*

Participants whose parents occupied high ranking or core positions in a gang, were exposed to a home environment that normalised and reinforced gang-related practices. In the case of Hamiora and Ropata who "*grew up in that space"* (Ropata) meant that membership in their fathers' respective gang was both expected and directly transferred positioning them to be second-generation gang members.

Participants who were born into and raised in households where parents or other significant family members maintained a connection or affiliation with a gang, provided first-hand experience of how they became accustomed to gang life. Consequently, early and consistent exposure to the gang lifestyle through significant family members unequivocally normalised, predestined, and precipitated participants' trajectory into the gang.

This category illustrated how participants' childhood experiences in their home environments contributed to the onset of delinquency and later stage gang affiliation. Their reflections on family networks revealed key moments, which were grouped into four themes namely single parent, maltreatment, unrealistic expectations, and parental gang relations. While participants viewed their family circumstances critical to trigger gang engagement, they also identified their broader social contexts as distinctive risk factors that introduced the gang culture in their lives. The next section discusses community-based influences, referred to as spatial risk factors, and their role in escalating and reinforcing delinquent behaviours.

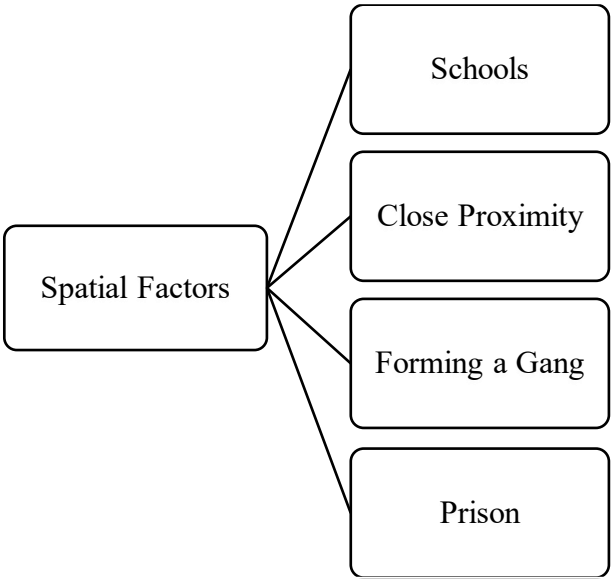
Spatial Factors

This category explores spatial predictors that facilitated and promoted delinquent behaviours and gang engagement. The risk factors under individual themes, such as schools, neighbourhoods, and prison environments are presented in Figure 5. 3. The schools and

neighbourhoods with extensive gang presence often produced a sense of vulnerability prompting participants to either join existing or form their own gangs to defend themselves. Participants, who spent time in prisons and either distrusted or perceived the institution to be unable to cater for their safety, decided to seek protection in gangs. Orientation to a particular gang was often influenced by family connections or by friendships formed in school and neighbourhood settings.

Figure 5. 3

Participants' Environment



Schools

Schools and courses served as important milieus where participants came in contact with peers with similarly adverse upbringing. In these environments, participants formed bonds with others who experienced trauma, neglect, or disconnection. Many of these peers had established ties to a well-known gang and introduced participants to gang culture. Gang

involvement not only provided a sense of belonging and identity, but also offered a means of protection, reducing the likelihood of being targeted by schoolyard bullies or rival groups.

For example, Rawiri, who after being made a ward of the state and removed from his mother's care, he was relocated to another ANZ town. As he recalled, he *"was still stuck in [his] mischief ways"* and as a result, he *"was expelled from college just before [he] turned 14."* While attending this course, he befriended another student who *"was a part of a [youth] gang … but he was a [adult gang] supporter."* As Rawiri *"started hanging out with him, and as the years kinda went on… [he] was introduced to the boys and to the older members."*

Despite Pene's upbringing appearing to be relatively stable, his introduction to the gang lifestyle began in high school. "*Well-known for sticking up for"* himself, he was recruited into a youth gang *"that was frequent in [his] high school."* At the time of his recruitment, Pene was unaware that this group *"had an association with a larger [organised adult] gang."* Through his connection with the youth gang, Pene *"began gaining the trust of [adult gang members], and them gaining [his] trust."*

Ānaru's involvement with gangs began when he moved from the South to the North Island and started attending a school with prolific gang presence. As his account demonstrates, his affiliation was motivated by the sense of vulnerability. His enculturation of gang hand signs and other visual identifiers became crucial in his symbolical expression of affiliation. As discussed in the forthcoming themes, relinquishing these gang identifiers played an important role in how he interpreted and navigated desistance from gang life.

In high school I noticed here, in [New Zealand region] is different to the South Island, where kids would be affiliated to a gang and you would often see people doing that, or doing this [showing the two dominant New Zealand gangs' hand signals] doing different hand signs … in high school schoolyards when you are a new kid, I suppose trying to fit in is important and I

ended up fitting in and by fitting in that meant choosing a hand sign effectively, aligning myself to one particular group more than the other.

For some participants, exposure to and the establishment of connections with gang affiliated peers started during their high school years. Their entry into the gang was typically preceded by a drawn out period of association which allowed them to learn gang identifiers and build mutual trust and rapport with the active members. While schools played a salient role, they were not the sole spatial drivers. Participants also identified their neighbourhoods dominated by local gangs as critical environmental factors for involvement in gang lifestyle.

Close Proximity

Participants identified their neighbourhoods, where local gangs were in close proximity, as critical spatial factors influencing their view on gang life. The likelihood of gang entry significantly increased when these spatial predictors were compounded with other risk factors such as dysfunctional family home, family members' gang involvement, or personal inclination toward antisocial and delinquent behaviours. This pattern was particularly evident in Tāmati's experience, as in addition to his traumatic upbringing and his older brothers' gang connections, he noted that his *"street was full of gang members."* Similarly, Hamiora was exposed to *"a lot of gang life and activity"*, not only through his father's involvement but also his peers' affiliation in his immediate neighbourhood. Yet, Heta's reflection extends this point:

The first gang I joined, was just around the corner from us … I says to my mate: Dude who is that? He said: That's my uncle, that's my mum's brother, he is a gangster. I says: Wow, he is a gangster.

Formulating friendships with members of youth or adult gangs, in these settings, would present opportunities for entry into the gang culture, even for those without adverse childhood experiences or familial gang ties. These connections played a pivotal role in shaping participants' decision regarding gang selection and in facilitating gang entry. Like in the case of Piripi, who was enticed to join the gang later in life by a close childhood friend with whom he *"grew up together,"* and who later became the "*president of the local chapter."* Similarly, Patrick was introduced to gang life while working at a gas station, where he met members of a gang, who *"used to come in there and [he] sort of liked them and drink with them."*

Some participants regarded their neighbourhoods, particularly those with strong gang presence as a crucial factor that drove their gang engagement. In these communities, gang affiliated peers acted like conduits, introducing participants to the gang life and facilitated their gang entry. Conversely, other participants responded to the insecurity and bullying stemming from the local gang activity by organising their own groups as a means of self-defence.

Forming a Gang

Instead of joining an existing gang, some participants established their own gangs with their neighbourhood peers. As illustrated in Kaia's account, "*starting up [their] own gang"* was a direct response and measures of protection against attacks by rival groups in the vicinity. While these gangs initially guaranteed personal safety, they evolved into protective factions for local neighbourhoods, which participants like Afa, came regard as their own territory:

I was hanging out with a whole lot of guys and we used to go to parties, and we decided that we should start a gang ... when I brought the gang out at first they [neighbours] didn't know how to take it, but later on, they felt that around our area was protected because we were there against other gangs they tried to come in.

The exposure to hostile gang activity in their neighbourhoods spurred participants to form their own bands. In this context, setting up gangs functioned as a preventive measure against rival gangs' potential aggression. Similarly, in prison settings, gangs offered protection and solidarity shielding participants from other inmate's predatory and intimidating behaviour.

Prison

Incarceration is seldom considered as a spatial risk factor for gang engagement because individuals entering the prison system are typically considered having pre-existing gang affiliation. However, for Tane and Mehaka, the prison environment itself served as a catalyst for gang entry, because within the confines of the prison life, gangs became increasingly appealing as they offered a sense of refuge, protection, and companionship. Notwithstanding their prior gang connections, both formally joined gangs during their incarceration, and their selection of gang was largely influenced by their existing peer relations.

For instance, in Tane's case his "*street gang was a feeder gang for a patched gang, motorcycle club so when [he] went to jail, [he] met some older, higher-ranking members of the motorcycle club*", who recruited him to their gang. While Tane implied that he joined the organised adult gang as a response to intimidation he encountered in prison, Mehaka was more direct, explicitly stating that he *"jumped on for protection"* from other inmates' hostile behaviour. Although, the need for such protection significantly diminished, both participants continued to maintain gang affiliation following their release.

This category highlighted spatial factors that participants considered as instrumental in influencing their decision to engage with the gang culture. For some gang entry was motivated by the need for protection from the enduring hostility posed by gangs operating in their schools, neighbourhoods, and prison environments. While part of this cohort aligned themselves with existing gangs because of their peer and family member connections, others formed their own groups in response to anticipated threats and conflict from rival gangs. Participants were typically drawn to gangs not only because of their interest in delinquency, but also due to gangs

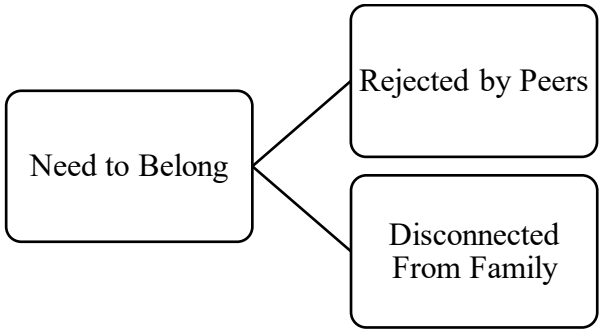
offering a refuge from perceived rejection by prosocial peers and/or disconnection from family members. How this desire for inclusion, acceptance and, a sense of belonging in a family-like peer group drove participants' gang entry is explored in the following section.

Need to Belong

The desire for belonging played a pivotal role in participants' decision to become involved with gangs. As reflected in earlier accounts, the paucity of emotional connection with prosocial peers and a perceived disconnection from family members led to a sense of diminished status and security in the conventional society. As depicted in Figure 5. 4, the themes: rejected by peers and disconnected from family explore how isolation from prosocial peer and familial groups (mainly as a result of participants' delinquent tendencies) prompted a search for an alternative group, where comradery and prestige was recognised and reinstated.

Figure 5. 4

Searching for Acceptance



Rejected by Peers

Several participants reported feeling rejected by their peer groups during their childhood. Heta's experience provides a poignant example. As a fatherless child his growing

frustration eventually manifested in violent behaviour. When his mother was no longer able to manage his escalating aggression, Heta was taken out of her care and placed with his aunt and uncle, who subjected him to severe physical abuse. Internalising these experiences, Heta came to believe the harsh discipline was the result of being a helpless, abandoned, and deviant child. This reinforced his perception that he "*was rejected all the time,"* particularly by peers who, he felt, *"didn't understand violent homes."* In response, he gravitated towards others who had similar adverse upbringing.

Racial tensions, shaped by ANZ's colonial history and its impact on its cultural composition, also directly contributed to participants feeling excluded. These ethnic frictions often surfaced in interactions amongst youth, as reflected in Roa's account of being *"bullied in a mainly Māori school"* for his lighter skin colouring. Roa's encounter was also echoed by Ānaru, who described similar experiences of being targeted during his schooling:

When I moved to the North Island because of the colour of my skin, I was sort of treated like a Pākehā, but I'd been brought up as a Māori. So it was hard for me to sort of find the right fit… I am always judged, bro, I've been judged in my whole life.

However, Kaha's reflection clearly encapsulates the underlying reasons participants turned to gangs, while it provides an overview of the central topic of this category:

They [other gang members] knew what it was that led me into the gang. And it's a similar thing for a lot of them, the acceptance and the peers; not having a sense of belonging whether it'd be with your peers or with your own family.

Although peer relations, or the lack thereof, played a key role in participants' gang engagement, a perceived disconnection from family members also contributed to orienting them towards experimenting with the gang lifestyle.

Disconnected From Family

Due to the propensity for delinquency, the gap between participants and their family members widened. Escalating antisocial behaviour not only strained relationship with immediate and extended family, but also attracted the attention of statutory agencies. The involvement of care and protection or youth justice services often further disrupted participants' family ties. For example, Manu described how, as "*a teenager [he] grew up alone in terms of family, because he was between foster homes and boys' homes. But [he] had heaps of friends in terms of other street kids and transients."* It was not until he became connected to his gang that he *"discovered [he] didn't have a family before."*

Tane's case reflects a similar course. The absence of a father figure, combined with his mother's inadequate parental supervision contributed to his engagement with delinquent peers, a choice strongly disapproved of by his prosocial relatives. Feeling judged and rejected, Tane's sense of disconnection from family members deepened:

A big part of me joining a gang was the sense of belonging and the sort of family that I didn't really have growing up. Like I had family but at the same time, sometimes I felt like I didn't.

Lacking emotional connections with prosocial peers and perceiving disconnection and abandonment from family members, participants sought alternative peer networks, that could satisfy their emotional needs by offering family-like connections. Through the exposure to the gang life, participants came to view the gangs as communities which could fulfill their needs for belonging, comradery, and prestige. This desire to establish meaningful relationships and

attain recognition, contributed to the development of an exalted view of gangs, which ultimately underpinned participants' motivation to join it.

Lifestyle Glorification

While the previous categories, explored participants' family backgrounds, geographical location, and peer networks, this category draws attention to the strong interrelationship between these factors and how they collectively, fostered a growing glorification of the gang lifestyle, where security, connectedness, and social status could be attained. Experiences of hardship, disconnection, and rejection in both family and wider community settings intensified participants' desire to belong to an alternative group. As Tane recounted *"when things happened"*, referring to key childhood events such as the loss of his father and other family members' inability to provide adequate supervision, these experiences impacted on his *"life choices, that pretty much set and led"* him toward gang involvement. As outlined in his quote, these early disruptions increased his fascination with gangs from a young age:

I think I sort of took a want like: Those guys [gang members] look cool. And I put it into a need. I need to be like these guys … I was always being intrigued in them I remember when I was young, I had seen them on the news, or I'd seen them on the street and I was like: Far out man, I wanna be like that guy.

Similarly, Ihaka and Heta, who grew up in solo-parent households expressed a deep yearning for a father figure who could provide safety and financial stability. Ihaka found these qualities in his uncles who supported his mother and *"helped [his] family live."* Consequently, *by the time [he] was 15, [he] knew that's what [he] wanna be. [He] didn't want to go and work."* Heta, on the other hand, idolised a gang leader because *"he looked cool, he looked*

tough, he looked strong, he looked awesome. [He] wanted a dad like that," someone who could protect him from abuse and community rejection.

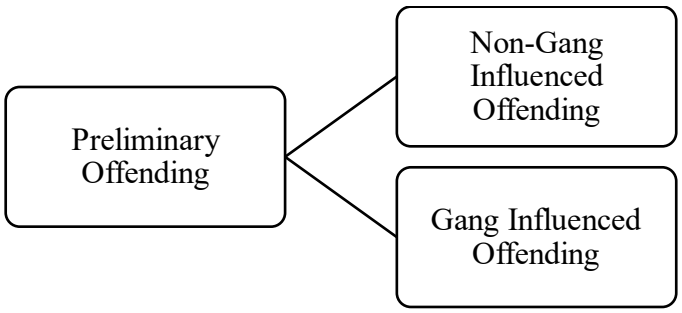
This category illustrates how participants' family and wider community experiences constructed an exalted view of the gang life. For some participants, gang membership symbolised prestige and material success; for others, it represented a community that offered solidarity, acceptance, and family-like relationships. Early exposure to gangs captured participants' imagination and triggered a desire to pursue gang membership as a life goal. This aspiration was primarily influenced by simultaneously occurring adversities in family and wider social contexts, which could trigger delinquent tendencies before gang entry, or such tendencies were escalated after initiation into gang life. The next category provides insights into, how delinquency, regardless of whether it developed pre or post-gang entry, aided familiarisation with gang practices and led to identification as a gang member.

Preliminary Offending

During the data analysis it became evident that participants' preliminary offending was either preceded or accelerated following their inception of gang affiliation. As displayed in Figure 5. 5, the two distinct themes reflect this variation. Evidently, the first theme explores narratives in which participants described engaging in severe misconduct independent of gang influence. Essentially, this theme suggests that delinquency was an existing trait that assisted gang entry. In contrast, the second theme captures narratives which outlines limited criminalistic affinity before gang entry occurred. These narratives point out that increased engagement in serious delinquency was attributed to gang affiliation. Regardless of when delinquency intensified, both themes support the notion that it was accepted and even endorsed in gang environment. Moreover, with sustained gang participation, engagement in delinquency was progressively normalised.

Figure 5. 5

The Triggers of Criminal Behaviour



Non-Gang Influenced Offending

Some participants were already engaging in criminal activities prior to formally joining a gang. For example, Taki, whose *"thing was drugs and drug dealing,"* quickly recognised the protective benefits of gang affiliation. He was aware that *"being in the gang sheltered [him] from being robbed, because when you are with the gang, people generally don't tend to want to rob you because they know [the gang protects you]*." In a similar vein, Iwi explained that he "*was already getting into some trouble"* and he knew *"that's pretty much where [entering the gang] [he] was heading to,"* given that most of his family and peer networks were gang involved. Finally, as Rawiri brought attention in his earlier quotes he *"was into crime; [he] was a bit of a burglar and stole cars"* before he befriended a gang member who introduced him to the wider gang circles.

Several participants reported involvement in severe misconduct (spurred by detrimental events in family and broader community contexts), before they began to formally affiliate with a gang. Their inclination to engage in serious criminal activities drew them closer to the gang life, where delinquency was tolerated, encouraged, and even protected. Conversely, for other participants, propensity for delinquency intensified after becoming involved in the gang.

Gang Influenced Offending

The gang lifestyle also attracted participants who did not display serious tendencies of misconduct but were nonetheless affected by risk factors, such as growing up in a single parent household and feeling excluded from prosocial peer groups. As noted earlier, gang membership often required engagement in illegal activities, however in return, participants reported to have received social and emotional peer support, protection, and elevated social status. The desire to fulfil these unmet needs served as a motivating factor for participating in delinquency.

The escalation of such behaviour is well illustrated in Heta's account. His challenging upbringing and disconnection from prosocial peers formulated his need for a protective father figure. He found these qualities in a gang leader, though not without significant cost:

So I am a good drawer, that was just a big laughingstock of that moment: Drawing is not going to make us any money. Gotta do anything in this world brother, you might of walked into the wrong neck of the woods. What are you thinking? I realised none of the things that I liked, they wanted to know about. They wanted other things so obviously violence, stealing: Can you steal? No, but I give it a good shot. So I started to seek the affirmation of the gang, so I started stealing … started with chocolates … I kept doing it, started getting caught.

Others like Manu's reflections also demonstrated that initiation into the gang was often conditional because *"to be part of the gang [he] had to commit a crime, so [he] robbed a diary."* Ānaru also described a gradual increase in offending, because after entering a gang he "*started with dabbling with little bits of petty crime,"* which rapidly progressed *"into little less petty crimes*,*"* resulting in more serious repercussions.

This category highlighted that participants' delinquent tendencies develop either before or after they entered the gang. Where, participants exhibited concerning delinquency, these

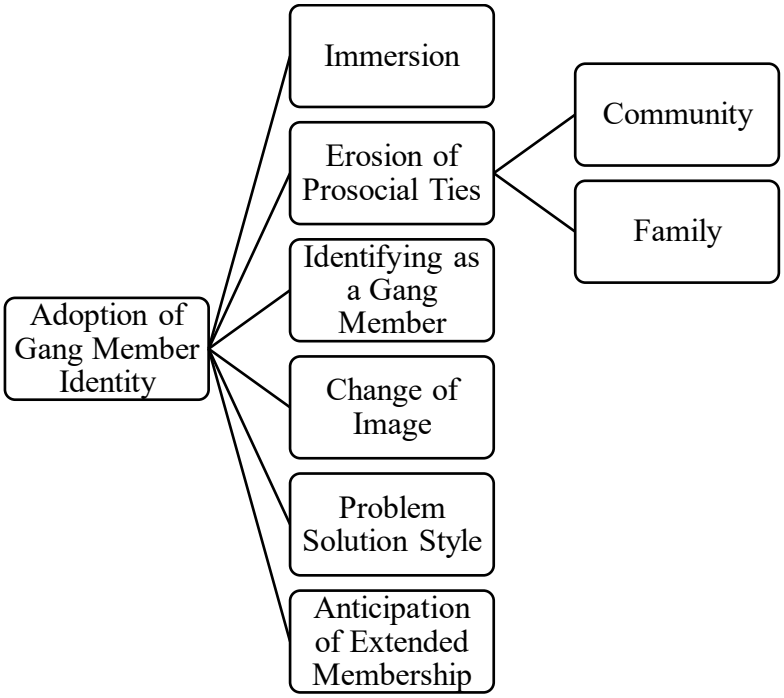
behaviour traits often aided socialisation into the gang. Conversely, for participants with minimal prior offending, delinquency intensified following gang entry. Frequent engagement with gang affiliated peers and encouragement to partake in antisocial behaviour scaffolded participants' internalisation of gang practices and norms. The next category addresses the post-gang entry factors that contributed to the crystallisation of participants' gang member identity.

Adoption of a Gang Member Identity

While the previous categories highlighted those factors that led participants to glamorise and eventually enter a gang, this category shifts focus to the post-entry events that altered their attitudes, behaviours, and ultimately their identities, marking a major turning point in their life course. The themes, depicted in Figure 5. 6, categorise and discuss this complex process of gang identification. The first two themes bring attention to distinct aspects of gangs' social suction effect, where immersion into a family-like network gradually erodes prosocial ties within the family and broader community. Subsequent themes such as change of image and the adoption of reactive problem solution style reveal how participants' growing endorsement of gang member role and changing identities were reflected in their self-presentation. The final theme, which centres on narratives of anticipation of extended membership, presents participants' identification with and categorical embeddedness in gang life.

Figure 5. 6

Indicators of Gang Member Identity



Immersion

Participants immersed themselves in the gang life through ceaseless socialisation with fellow members. The sense of cohesion and solidarity found within the realms of gang compensated for earlier experience of rejection and disconnection, conducing a strong desire to commit spending most of their time with other members. This frequent and high-rate interactions strengthened participants' social and emotional bonds with the other members and facilitated their acculturation into the gangs' practices and operation.

For example, Ruka's account illustrated how constant association with other members deepened his identification with the gang: *"We were 24/7 [name of gang redacted], because that's what our life was."* Kaha shared a similar sentiment by describing how the gang became his surrogate family: *"They had become my actual family ... because you do and share everything together ... your friends come to know you better than your own family does."*

However, it was Heta who most eloquently articulated how the sense of comradery and inclusion fulfilled his unmet need for familial bonds, motivating him to continue to associate with other members:

Deep betrayals made me wanna be loyal, the opposite of betrayal. So, I started to practice that with my gang. You know, I've been let down, I am not ganna let these fellas down, especially when they are feeding me, helping me out, helping me become a man, a gangster. I stayed true to that, yeah, that thing really made me trap into it, you know, it was all about the gang building, loyalty every time we connected. Every time I am connecting with them, stealing with them, selling drugs with them, whatever, any association, connection I am building loyalty, loyalty, loyalty. I am building something I never had, building a bond.

A sense of cohesion, acceptance, and mutual support were key factors for participants' entry into the gang. Feeling validated and welcomed into a family-like network spurred participants' motivation to spend extended periods with other members. This led to a gradual familiarisation with the norms and practices of the gang lifestyle. While constant socialisation strengthened bonds within the gang, it simultaneously weakened participants' connections to prosocial groups (such as employment, education, and family members). The impact of gang affiliation on participants' relationships outside the gang is explored in the next theme.

Erosion of Prosocial Ties

Immersion into the gang world further deteriorated participants' already fragile connections with prosocial institutions. The following two subthemes present participants' reflections on how their reputation as criminal gang members negatively affected their access to gainful employment, educational opportunities, and participation in family events. Moreover, the themes bring attention to how the resulting perception of further social isolation

and alienation generated greater gang embeddedness and reinforced participants' reliance on the gang for support, rendering it to become the primary source of identity.

Community

The wider communities' stereotypical view of gang members became apparent to participants when they either lost existing jobs or faced considerable challenges in securing employment after entering a gang. For instance, Piripi recounted that shortly after joining a gang his employer *"let [him] go, because they reckoned, [he] was going to bring the company into disrepute."* Meanwhile, as an active gang member, Ruka struggled to find work, noting that *"not even in the freezing works, they wanted"* him, and Tane was denied entry into social sector employment and education, largely due to his overt display of gang affiliation:

I still wanted to work with youth as well, because I wanted to try to help steer them away from being where I was. I was told; I wasn't allowed to do that. I was also trying to go study, but I was also told by people that whilst being an active member in the club I wasn't allowed to pursue that life, because it would be looked at as I was trying to recruit people.

The erosion of prosocial ties in the participants' community was often viewed as both the cause and the consequence of gang affiliation. Employers' approach to participants reflected the prevalent societal stereotypes associated with gang members. This frequently resulted in participants losing their jobs after entering the gang or being denied entering lawful employment or educational opportunities due to their active membership. In addition, non-gang affiliated family members also began to withdraw support, which by further isolating participants reinforced their belief that the gang was the only source of social support.

Family

Besides facing rejection in broader community settings, participants also encountered their family members' disapproval regarding their gang involvement. For instance, Ānaru *"was disowned by his mother,"* Pene *"was excommunicated from his family members, who had no association with the gangs,"* and Tane's family members and friends *"wiped their hands of him when he started to join the street gangs."* While these accounts bring attention to how gang involvement can disable family connections, Kaha's reflection provides deeper insights into how such rejections can lead to the experience of alienation and exclusion, which in turn, may reinforce continued association with the gang:

They [parents and siblings] didn't accept my choice, my lifestyle, they didn't accept the path [joining the gang] that I had taken they understood why, but they never accepted it and as a result, I guess I was sort of pushed out from the family, which really hurt. I wasn't included in family things like christenings, births, you know, my nieces' and nephews' birthdays … understandable they wanted to protect themselves. That's made me go deeper with the gangs, because of my family were just not including me anymore.

Participants' narratives illuminate the extent to which gang affiliation can strain family connections. For them, gang involvement elicited strong reactions from parents and other extended family members. Over time, these strained family ties led to greater social isolation from both family members and non-gang affiliated friends.

The perceived disconnection from prosocial family networks, combined with rejection by institutions reinforced participants' belief that conventional society had cast them out and attached stigmatising labels, regarding them as inherently dangerous and untrustworthy. This

perception motivated deeper gang embeddedness and triggered the adoption of behaviours, attitudes, and appearance expected of a gang member.

Identifying as a Gang Member

As participants' previous accounts pointed out, identification with a gang developed through constant association with other members and the gradual disintegration of prosocial ties. With limited exposure to influences outside the gang, integration in the gang culture increased, which profoundly shaped participants' self-perception and personality traits. Ānaru's narrative was selected to demonstrate this process, as it offers a sophisticated explanation of his emerging gang self-conception. In his account, he not only articulated distinction and tension between his non-gang and gang identities (a reoccurring and prominent element throughout his gang engagement and exit process), but also recognised that his gang member identity was a product of social influence and collective behaviours around him rather than his inherent predisposition for delinquent propensity:

I felt for a while especially around my 17 – 18 years of age, like this was the choice [becoming a gang member] I was going to make. That's what I really could see, all of us were doing it, I looked in the mirror, what I saw back at myself was: Ok, you are a tough, you are a gangster, you are going to be something. … Because I haven't always been a great guy, I haven't done a lot of good things, a lot of bad shit. In fact I used to joke about this, I kinda still do sometimes: That's [first name redacted], [he] is not here right now, but [hit name redacted] is here. So you have to deal with him. And this person of is a battle rapper, he is a bit of a gangster, he is a bit of a kinda of a toughy. (Ānaru)

Who is [first name omitted] then? (Interviewer)

Yeah, [he] is now this professional guy, the social worker. (Ānaru)

Other illustrative examples of how participants perceived and embraced a gang member identity was offered by Heta. Like Ānaru, he also reflected on the internal conflict between his non-gang and gang member identities. However, Heta's reflection brought into focus how continuous interactions with other members amplify and reinforce the defining characteristics and expectation pertaining to the gang member role:

My wife was brought up totally different, had a good mum, had a good dad, she saw the good in me, loved that piece then found out who I was: Who is this other person? What the hell, you are a monster. I says: Yeah, I am, that's my thing, what you hate, the boys love. So, any time we had clashed I fuck off to the pad, where the others go: Here he is, we have been missing you brother. Here he is, we thought we lost you. Over there you have been trying to have a happy family. You will never be, you will always be a mongrel you will always be a killer. Yeah, I will.

Simply yet explicitly, Pene expressed that, as an active gang member, his goal *"was to be seen as a scab on the ass of society."* His reflection captured what many participants retrospectively recognised, that they acted in ways consistent with their internalised beliefs about what wider society expected from them. This meant, that their perception of being an outsider was further strengthened by fully embracing a gang member identity through continued deliberate disregard for conventional norms and values and with the intent to cause serious harm and discomfort to others.

Limited ties with prosocial institutions, combined with regular association with the gang embedded participants in the gang world. This drove them to internalise the gang norms and practices, adopt gang-related characteristics, and learn how gang members typically behave

and present themselves. Ingrained identification was also reflected in appearance and demeanour, approaches to solving problem, and a desire and anticipation of long-term membership. The following themes illustrate these symbolic markers of gang identity adoption.

Change of Image

Participants' deep immersion in the gang culture, which consistently reinforced gang member self-concept, also began to influence participants' outward presentation. The selection of specific attire, the use of hand signals, and the application of tattoos served as visible means of communicating gang affiliation. For instance, Tane and Mehaka tattooed their faces, while in prison, because such displays of gang affiliation *"is all accepted in there, it's normal" (Mehaka)* to indicate to other inmates where one's loyalties lie.

Other participants utilised less durable markers of gang affiliation. For example, Pene recounted how his *"whole wardrobe for years and years"* consisted exclusively of clothing in his gang's colour. Moreover, Ānaru's quote bring attention to his gradual immersion into the gang environment through the adaptation to the demands of gang member identity, which in turn resulted in dressing in a particular way and habitually using gang symbols to publicly express his role commitment:

... it took practice to do the gang signs, and do the gang, and become entrenched in it and because you become monkey see and monkey do, and you become do what you see ... So the 90s fashion the hip-hop fashion, the basketball shorts, the baggy jeans, the Urban T-shirts, the New Era fitted caps, those sorts of things that were our fashion of the time, and you add a bit of colour to it, and it just looks gangster.

Kaperiere's account advances these insights by pointing out that the underlying purpose of highly visible gang-related tattoos, clothing, and other symbols were intended not only to

demonstrate affiliation but also to send a clear message to rival gang members about one's affiliation. Moreover, these external features symbolised participants' alienation from conventional society and marked an internal shift towards adopting a gang member identity. It eventually overshadowed other personal characteristics and emerged across various aspects of life that were beyond the gang itself.

… so from the beginning I started to cover myself with tattoos. There would be no way to exit this … so you'd put your tattoos and colours somewhere visual so you couldn't hide it from the enemy. So, you are always open to confrontation to fight … My face was meant to be done.

As participants became deeply enmeshed in the gang lifestyle, their gang member identity gradually overpowered other personal characteristics, and their altered self-conception began to manifest in their external appearance. The temporary and permanent signs of gang affiliation such as facial and other conspicuous tattoos, gang branded and coloured clothing, and hand signals served to overtly signal and symbolise their absorption and resolute commitment to gang member role. Beneath the external signs, participants' demeanour also began to reflect the espousal of socially expected behaviour of a gang member.

Problem Solution Style

As indicated in Kaperiere's comment in the previous section, gang practices often encouraged the use of violence as a method of problem solving. For several participants this type of conflict resolution style was an easily adoptable approach, because they normalised it during their upbringing within their families. Participants' narratives illustrated how these reactive responses became frequent strategies to deal with perceived judgement and stigma as their personalities increasingly aligned with expectations associated with gang members.

For example, as Heta outlined in his earlier quote, his severe childhood events served as his *"breeding ground, [and] training ground,"* preparing him for the gang world. These childhood experiences of *"deep rejections and abandonments that was all caged up within [his] heart"* set him up to think *"If you feel like the black sheep, be the black sheep."* The other members in the gang environment welcomed and actively encouraged this mentality by repeatedly telling Heta that he *"will always be a mongrel ... will always be a killer."* Being reinforced, Heta's use of violent problem solution style led to being involved in *"lot of fights, beating people up, and getting into a lot of problems."*

Tāmati's adverse childhood events also generated deep sense of inferiority and alienation from mainstream society. His interactions with the public clearly reflected this internalised outsider status. Moreover, as Tāmati presented himself through the lens of a gang member, blatant display of aggression became his default strategy to respond and navigate his perceived stigmatised status. This approach not only mirrored the way his perception of how his social environment operated and managed conflict but also reflected his acculturation of practices and behaviour expected from a gang member:

I had to go to the social welfare or something it was a real wall up, anything to go into the society or anything like that, anything to come into a café like this it was unheard of, just been out in the public it was unheard of ... I felt judged. Noone was allowed to look at me because if I found that they were looking at me they were judging me, I automatically just fought.

Mehaka's approach to solving problems and asserting his gang member status was like Tāmati's. His facial gang-related tattoo perhaps attracted public curiosity that Mehaka could easily misinterpret as judgement. Alternatively, the perception of judgement may have been accurate and socially enacted and Mehaka's defensive and aggressive responses as a form of

anticipatory self-protection. In either case, his reactions reflected an internalised expectation of stigma, and alignment with behaviours associated with gang affiliated individuals.

Yeah, I would say: What the fuck are you looking at? you know that sort of thing. To be real, I was always angry so people wouldn't even go there or wouldn't look. It was like a deterrent.

Others like Kaha and Pene resorted to confrontation to resolve conflict. They both used intimidation to protect their diminished self-esteem and to assert their dominance. Consequently, these strategies functioned as defence mechanisms and means to demand respect to fulfil their perceived elevated status within both their immediate circles and wider communities.

If they looked down on me or didn't wanna look at me, I loved it I fed on that fear. I loved that when people would look at you going [showing some head motions and facial reactions], and they wouldn't know where to look when I caught them. So, I had to go around, and they were like this, or go like this, I used to love it. I thrived on that fear. (Kaha)

I used to be like if people walked past and they'd be giggling for whatever reason and not necessarily at me, my earlier self would turn around and make an issue of it. (Pene)

Fuelled by feelings of inferiority and insecurity developed during participants' formative years, impulsive and hostile responses to conflict were reinforced through the ways gang environments operated. Consequently, participants' reactions reflected the internalised methods to manage conflict and cast light on how collective gang behaviour intensified member's confrontational approach to dealing with judgement and simultaneously gaining

respect in their immediate and broader social environments. As indicated in the preceding themes and subthemes, criminal gang entry negatively affected multiple areas of participants' lives, further embedding them into the criminal gang world and subsequently, fostering anticipation of long-term or even life-long criminal gang engagement.

Anticipation of Extended Membership

Participants' earlier accounts detailing frequent association with other members at the expense of prosocial contacts, visible changes in appearance, and a reliance on confrontational and violent behaviour to resolve conflict and demand respect, indicated profound and unwavering commitment to the gang lifestyle, which was further communicated through their anticipation of extended membership. For instance, Pene described that he "*was so far in, and so dug in"* the gang's financial operations that he believed that he *"was going to be in there for the rest of [his] life"*, adding, *"I was just given away to the gang."* On the other hand, for Kaperiere the gang provided a powerful "*sense of belonging"* and community, which gave rise to his belief that *"he was never going to leave."* As he explained, members affirmed each other's long-term commitment through expressions like *"Bro, to death, until the casket drops."*

Lastly, Heta's account illustrates how prolonged involvement in the gang life honed his skills and cemented his identity as a career gang member, which in turn, sparked his outlook, where continued gang involvement remained top priority:

All my life, since I was five bro, I focused all my life to be a gangster, to be tough. So it was a big part of my identity … being a gang member, am good at what I am doing: Boof, boof fuck I'll go get the money he owes. I was good at it, you know … I never ever wanted to give up being a gang member, that's who I was that was my identity, that's who I felt that's what I am a [his gang's name redacted]… I thought I was going to die with them.

The shift in participants' identification with and absorption of gang life was clearly articulated through the expectation of long-term or life-long gang membership. As conventional society regarded gang affiliation negatively, participants' social ties with prosocial family and wider community networks began to erode, which led to further isolation and greater reliance on the gang for support. This immersion rendered the gang lifestyle to become the primary source of social connections and interactions significantly increasing participants' association with other members and facilitating the adoption of gang practices and values. Deepening embeddedness into the gang world, alongside growing identification with the gang manifested in participants' altered appearances, mannerisms such as the adoption of hostile conflict resolution style, and expectations of long standing criminal gang involvement. By examining the coalescing factors underlying participants' formation of a dominant gang identity, this category illustrated the profound impact of gang membership on participants' lives, personal characteristics, and anticipated future aspirations.

Conclusion

This chapter brings attention to those events that gradually pushed participants towards entry into and identification with a gang. From the analysis of their narratives, it has become apparent (often well understood by the participants) that gang membership status was not a matter of spontaneous adoption but rather a prolonged process originating from adverse experiences during upbringing. These frequently interconnected and simultaneously occurring events comprised of experiences of parental (caregiver) maltreatment and unrealistic expectations, and non-intact family composition in which parental or other significant family members' gang affiliation was not uncommon.

In addition to family network influences, participants' stories revealed that spatial factors such as schools, prison and neighbourhood environments, were also contributors to

gang engagement. Geographical proximity to gangs motivated some participants to form their own gang with the aim of averting potential threats or hostility from rival groups.

Increasing delinquent behaviours often led to rejection and disconnection from prosocial family and peer networks. These experiences inadvertently contributed to perceived sense of displacement from the conventional society, increasing participants' desire to belong to an alternative peer group where cohesion, acceptance, and social status could be attained. Pre-existing delinquent behaviour (violence and dishonesty) generally eased entry into the gang, where involvement in criminality rapidly accelerated post-gang entry.

Membership demanded participants' time and social commitment, which in turn assisted the internalisation of gang norms and values. Reinforced identification with the gang further eroded remaining ties with non-gang family and wider community groups. Perceived isolation from conventional society elevated the gang to be the primary source for support and social connections, deepening immersion in the gang world. This embeddedness was expressed through appearance, conduct, and problem solution styles. Both the feelings of rejection by the conventional society and the gang's social suction effect facilitated anticipation that affiliation would last long-term, if not for life.

Despite this chapter's theme portraying the way participants viewed gangs as an institution that provided a sense of refuge and emancipation from abandonment, disconnection, and inferiority, the following chapters place gang norms, practices, and dynamics in a different light. More specifically, the next chapter explores attributes of gangs and gang membership that gave rise to participants' internal conflicts and vacillation between continued involvement and withdrawal from the gang. This chapter also expands on the immediate consequences that followed the event of gang exit.

Chapter Six

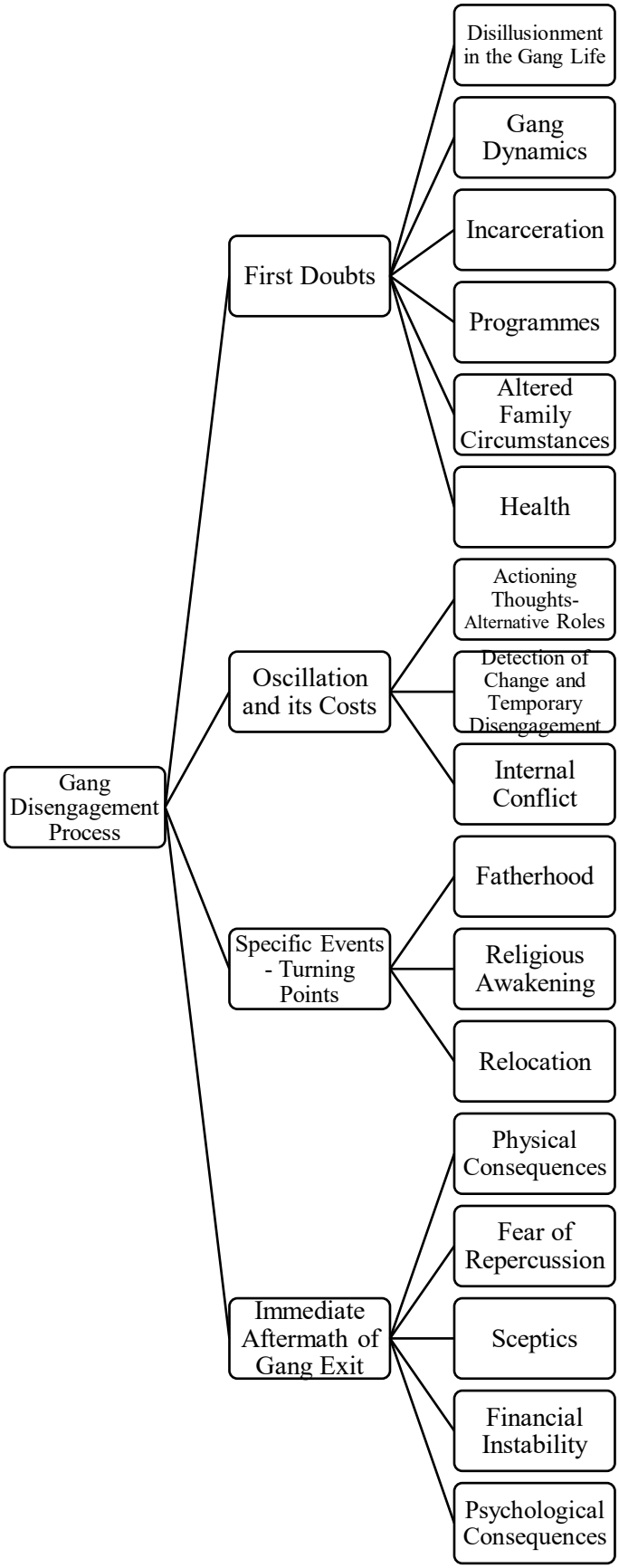
Gang Disengagement Process

This chapter presents a series of factors that initiated participants' gradual withdrawal from the gang role and their inclination to (re)construct prosocial attachments. As displayed in Figure 6. 1, the category of first doubts about continued membership is illustrated through events such as disillusionment in gang life and its dynamics, incarceration, participation in programmes, altered family circumstances, and health complications that triggered these uncertainties. These experiences laid the foundation for the next category, the oscillation and its costs, which details participants' motivation to trial roles consistent with prosocial practices.

This category further illustrates how, while still holding onto gang membership, participants' new roles incompatible with the gang lifestyle provoked discontent among fellow members, which often resulted in a momentary suspension of the disengagement process. However, specific events, namely fatherhood, a religious awakening, or relocation acted as catalysts that prompted participants to exit from the criminal gang and represented transformative turning points in their gang-centric life trajectories. Finally, the chapter concludes by addressing the aftermath of leaving the gang. The immediate ramifications of exit are discussed under themes like physical consequences, fear of repercussions, sceptics, financial instability, and psychological consequences.

Figure 6. 1

Gang Disengagement Process

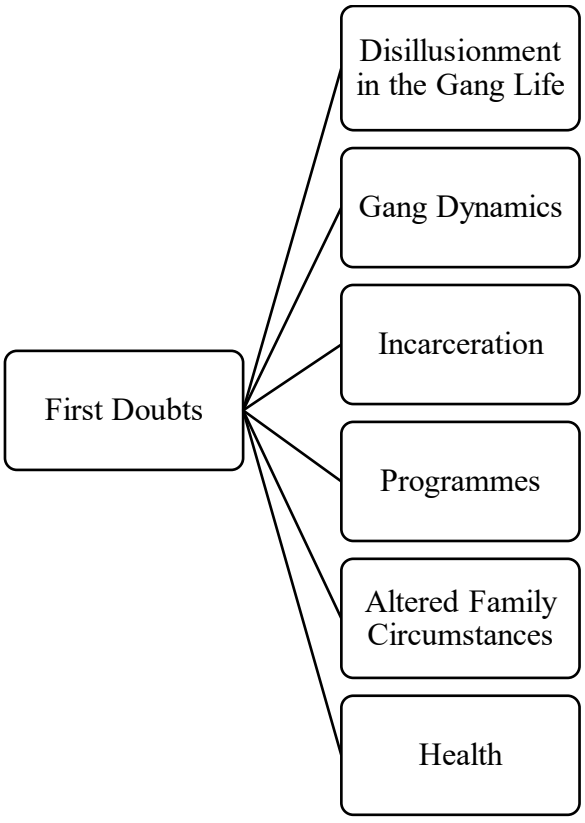


First Doubts

This first section explores events, which prompted participants to doubt the value of gang membership. These reservations often stemmed from experiences that participants attributed to the inherent features of gang life. As shown in Figure 6. 2, the negatively perceived aspects of gang life are organised into themes like disillusionment in the gang life and its dynamics. Additional themes such as incarceration, participation in programmes, altered family circumstances, and aging-related health complications discuss participants' shifting commitment to gang life. As these experiences (often occurring simultaneously) compelled participants to reconsider their pledged, unconditional commitment to the gang role, they laid the foundation for the disengagement process.

Figure 6. 2

Inception of Uncertainty About Gang Membership



Disillusionment in the Gang Life

While participants' initial engagement in the gang life was the result of seeking safety, family-like connections, and comradery, the growing incongruence between their expectations and day-to-day realities began to raise disillusionment in the perceived benefits of gang life. With more time spent in the gang, participants became mindful of the mistrust and the lack of genuine support amongst members. Participants evaluated and interpreted these constant discrepancies between the initial portrayal of gang life and its lived reality as inherent and permanent features of the gang culture. For example, as Frank's discontent with the gang life demands increasingly took hold, he started to question his role commitment:

We couldn't have friends outside [the gang], and also we had to be at the club-house on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights and Sunday. I started to get a bit pissed off with that.

The realisation that participants were not as valued or supported by other members as they were to them also sparked a sense of uncertainty about their place in the gang. In Heta's and Pene's accounts these disappointments in other members' conduct, which eventually sparked their initial doubts about continued gang life can be observed:

There were a lot of disloyalties as well, going in really loyal to this gang and then the next minute, this guy is saying this, but he is not doing this. You know, the whole proper good stuff people are not adding up. I tell you, there were a lot of internal disappointments with some of the values that's what ultimately helped me question my place in the [gang]. (Heta)

I came up into the court room, and I went out onto the dock, and I looked across the room, and all I saw was my mum, dad, partner, and son. There were no other gang members there. I started thinking: This is fucked up I have given six or seven years of my life to these fellas, and they are not here … I met back up with the rest of the people involved with the [gang] and I started asking questions: Where was everybody? … they had every excuse in the room. So it's just led me to thinking: OK, maybe, these fellas don't love me as much as I love them … and it just chipped away at me. (Pene)

The mundane and repetitive nature of the gang life also motivated participants to consider change. For instance, Tāmati said his gang life was limited because he *"used to just go in between seven houses and didn't have any friends."* This led him to feel as he *"was chasing [his] tail with same old things like drugs, gangs, family, jail,"* which ultimately culminated in a moment of realisation: *"Surely, there is more to the world … something needs to change."*

Toko had a similar epiphany. After being drunk *"every morning, and as [he] kept drinking and smoking into the afternoon,"* the monotony of gang life increasingly took a toll on him. This realisation led him to conclude: *"Oh bugger it, I've had enough of this [lifestyle]."*

Participants' initial doubts about their commitment to the gang role began to emerge when everyday realities contradicted their initial expectations of what gang life entailed. For instance, the paucity in reciprocal support and ongoing deception evoked thoughts that life in gang may not be how it was initially imagined. In other instances, the gang lifestyle's perceived repetitiveness gave rise to doubts about role commitment. As discussed in the next theme, overt display of frustration with the gang internal politics, particularly when they were perceived to compromise personal interests, also sparked doubts about remaining in the gang.

Gang Dynamics

Participants who openly voiced dissatisfaction with intra-gang dynamics often faced hostility from gang leaders and fellow members. In many cases, this resulted in being subjected to physical violence or temporary expulsion. Even though these experiences did not instantly result in permanent gang disengagement, they were instrumental in prompting participants to reflect on the viability of remaining involved. This tension is evident in Rawiri's account, who following *"disagreements, started to hold a lot of resent against some members,"* which led to confrontations with his leaders and eventually resulted in him being *"de-patched;"* a term Rawiri used to describe the temporary revocation of his membership.

Similarly, Kaha's commitment to the gang lifestyle gradually abated as a result of *"getting a hiding,"* because he refused to comply with certain orders. He explained that witnessing *"all the gang politics within the gang, not between different gangs but within the gang itself, [he] started to have thoughts, this was not what [he] wanted for the rest of his life."*

Overt expression of frustration with gang dynamics and practices often left participants to face consequences like physical abuse or revocation of gang membership. Such experiences initiated doubts about continuing to commit to the gang member role. Besides disillusionment with gang dynamics, changes in personal conditions also stimulated uncertainty about sustaining gang membership. The following themes explore how events such as incarceration, engagement in rehabilitative programmes, changes in family circumstances, and deteriorating health conditions served as an impetus for participants to consider alternatives to gang life.

Incarceration

As a result of gangs' promotion of criminal and delinquent conduct, many participants faced incarceration at some point during their active gang involvement. Imprisonment was typically regarded as a significant life event, which for some participants, acted as a gateway into the gang (as outlined in the previous chapter under the Prison theme, pp. 139-140), while

for several others it had the opposite effect. These participants generally considered incarceration as a factor that heightened their uncertainty about continuing with the gang lifestyle. For instance, Kaha, Ānaru, and Toatoa all cited that *"the potential prison sentence for the rest of [their] life*" *(Toatoa)* was the key reason for reconsidering their gang membership. Particularly, because incarceration meant prolonged separation from meaningful relationships, such as their spouses, children, and other significant others.

In relation to incarceration, a notable development can be observed in Afa's narrative. While he initially attributed his participation in delinquent behaviour and subsequent imprisonment to escaping his father's strict discipline (pp. 132-133), he later reflected on "*going in jail for the club"* was a defining feature of gang life, which he no longer wished to accept. This reflection signals a shift in his thinking and demonstrates his growing reluctance to adhere to gang practices, alongside a fading commitment to long-term gang membership.

Tāmati's account further illustrates how repeated and extended periods of incarceration can prompt self-reflection and spark a desire for change. His following narrative not only highlights his key personal traits that contributed to imprisonment and how the prison environment gave rise to his thoughts about disengaging from the gang but also demonstrates how exiting a gang is typically a drawn out process:

I remember being in the D-block. D-block is really sort of like the inner prison. They separate prisoners from the prisoners. I remember being there at the end of the landing, and I realised that I'd come as far as I could go in prison. It was my anger that got me there, and I looked that way [pointing left] and I realised anything after this it's all mental institutions. And I told myself: Surely, I am not mental. So I looked back that way [pointing right] and I realised I had to get back that way. That was a challenge to get back there [pointing right], it took few years.

Serving prison sentences was a recurring theme in participants' stories. Several participants credited lengthy and frequent incarcerations as a catalyst for increased hesitation to continue with criminal gang affiliation. These doubts intensified when participants recognised that persistent delinquent lifestyle could lead to extended incarceration, which in turn prolong separation from significant others such as spouses, children, and other prosocial support. For other participants, imprisonment presented the opportunity to engage in rehabilitative interventions, which aimed at triggering reflection on the components of their life trajectories governing their life choices.

Programmes

During incarceration, participants enrolled in rehabilitative programmes designed to curb their engagement in criminal gang activities. For example, prison-based cultural programmes supported participants to reconnect with their cultural heritage and identity, which simultaneously prompted them to question the sustainability of their criminal careers and gang involvement. This was evident in Taki's account, where he described how spending *"two and a half years in a Māori focused unit helped him hugely to find out [his] identity and helped [him] try and do the right things."*

Other therapeutic programmes offered in prison shed light on various social, behavioural, and lifestyle determinants that contributed to continued gang engagement. Although Heta initially approached one such programme with hesitation because he felt *"the facilitators were stripping [them] back like onions into the core"*, after a short period, he began to recognise that "*there is some truth in this."* As the programme encouraged deeper self-reflection, it helped him realise: *"I was never going to be able to give my sons a successful life that they deserve as long as my foot's in it [the gang]."* This moment of clarity allowed Heta to re-evaluate his frustrations with the gang and how his behaviour patterns were impacting his family. Ultimately, this introspection helped him weigh the true cost of gang lifestyle.

While prison-based cultural programmes were structured to support participants to locate their cultural heritage and develop a new cultural identity, interventions addressing psychosocial factors helped participants recognise how their decision-making and life choices led to (re)imprisonment. Hence, incarceration could at times, indirectly provide participants with opportunities to develop doubts about sustaining a gang lifestyle that centred around criminal activities. As illustrated in the following section, changes in family circumstances such as becoming a father or entering a romantic relationship were also instrumental in assessing the reality of incarceration and separation from significant others. Consequently, these changes in family status also instilled doubts about ongoing gang affiliation.

Altered Family Circumstances

A change in family or relationship status such as having a first child or forming a relationship with a non-gang affiliated partner, was considered a significant event that prompted doubts about sustaining commitment to the criminal gang life. For participants like Kaia, concerns about the impact of the criminal gang lifestyle on his child induced an internal process of revaluating his role in the gang:

It was my first son's birth when things started to happen to my thinking. I had a very violent lifestyle before then ... After my son was born, I felt I was living a fake life in the gang, I couldn't find my place in the gang, my heart just wasn't in it anymore. I started to question my place there, whether I am living a fake life.

Changes in family circumstances, such as taking on a stepfather role, also produced doubts about gang commitment. As previously outlined, Frank became frustrated with social expectations tied to his gang member role that required him to spend extended periods with the gang and discouraged connection with outsiders. Frank's new relationship, in which his partner

had a young son made him feel he *"was sort of becoming a father figure to him."* As the gang frowned upon his time devoted to family life, his discontent with the gang's rules increased, leading him to become a *"rebel"* within the gang.

Similarly, Tane reflected on how his partner *"gave [him] a taste of what life was like outside of that [gang] world."* However, he acknowledged that he *"was too intertwined in the gang"* for this relationship alone to be enough to sever his entrenched commitment to his gang.

Participants frequently regarded the change in their family circumstances as the origins of their altered commitment to the criminal gang lifestyle. More specifically, participants described the birth of a child or the establishment of a relationship with a non-gang affiliated partner as moments that oriented them toward alternative social roles. Although these events did not result in immediate disengagement, they triggered new self-conceptions that began to challenge the gang member role demands. While earlier themes focused on external conditions, the next theme explores how biological changes such as aging and declining physical health prompted participants to question the continuation of their criminal gang membership.

Health

Aging deteriorated physical strength and capabilities, making it increasingly difficult to meet gang role demands. Hence, older participants like Whiunui articulated that "*medical reasons"* and the fact they *"started to get older"* made it difficult to uphold status in the gang, leading them to reconsider its continuation.

A serious accident could also impair physical ability to maintain criminal gang membership. In Tāmati's case, a car crash, that nearly claimed his life when *"a steel rod went straight through [him] and just missed [his] heart*," not only "*physically slowed [him] down"* but also shook his confidence. Confronted with the fragility of life, Tāmati began to reflect on his life choices and raised the question: "*Is this [the gang] all that is there for me?"*

Participants regarded the gang's internal dynamics, frequent and long-term incarceration, participation in cultural and therapeutic programmes, changes in familial circumstances, and health concerns as factors or events that sparked their uncertainty about maintaining membership in the criminal gang. In several instances, their narratives suggested that these were not standalone influences, instead they shaped participants' thinking in concert. For instance, Tāmati's frequent incarceration and his car accident that physically slowed him down collectively triggered a shift in his perspective, drawing his attention to life outside the gang. Similarly, in Frank's case, the impact of his gang membership demands on his romantic relationship with a non-gang affiliated partner intensified his frustration and spurred him to question his commitment to the gang. These cases illustrate how, more often than not, multiple events can generate growing emotional discontent with the criminal gang role, especially, when members realise how the demands of the role conflicts with personal interests and responsibilities such as being a partner or parent.

While these events were not sufficient to fully pull participants out of the gang, they increased dissatisfaction with gang life. As discontent crept to the forefront, participants began to envision and experiment with alternative roles. The following themes discuss how despite still holding onto full criminal gang membership, participants took actions and sought out alternative roles inching closer to the event of gang exit.

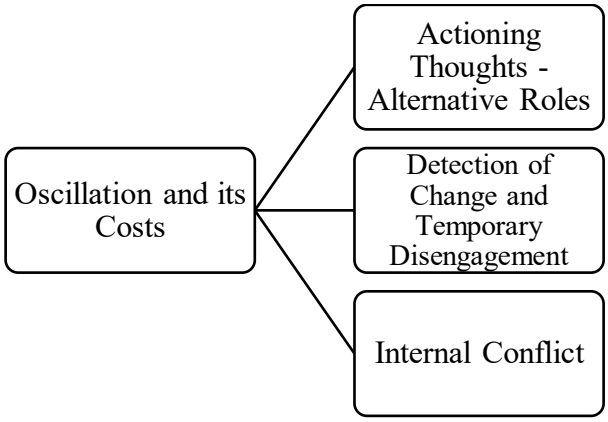
Oscillation and its Costs

This category explores three themes, namely actioning thoughts – alternative roles, detection of change and temporary disengagement, and internal conflict (Figure 6. 3). The first theme begins by discussing how initial doubts about criminal gang membership prompted experimentation with roles outside the gang. It then addresses how this experimentation further weakened participants' gang ties. The second theme focuses on gang associates' reactions to

participants' diminished loyalty. The final theme highlights how the fear of losing access to the gang's benefits left participants feeling trapped in the criminal gang world.

Figure 6. 3

Experimenting With New Roles



Actioning Thoughts – Alternative Roles

In several instances, events, which sparked participants' initial doubts evolved into experimentation with roles outside the gang. For example, as outlined in Taki's and Heta's earlier reflections (pp. 168-169), both engaged in a prison programme, that enabled them to recognise the serious harm their actions had caused and the ripple effects these had on their communities. Driven by a desire to change course, Taki and Heta began to explore alternatives while remaining active in the gang:

I was still attached to the gang. But I wanted to prove that I had this big value within me, and I wanted to prove that a man can live a good life, a right life, but still be a gang member. It was hard work man, I had given up the drugs, given up cigarettes, given up alcohol, trying to give up violence and all of this. (Heta)

Because I always thought, if I am a gang member from doing this and if doing that, I thought (the name of programme redacted) would fail me. So I thought, because I am that type of person that would do something just so I can go and say: I knew it was all shit. I wanted to do it for it to fail me so I can go back and then to say: Fuck you, your system is all shit, you are a liar. But I haven't been able to do that, so it has proven me wrong. (Taki)

In other instances, growing discontent and disillusionment in the gang lifestyle motivated participants to experiment with alternative roles to meet needs they had originally expected the gang to fulfill. Participants often found these core needs namely belonging, acceptance, and purpose were better supported by the values and beliefs promoted within religious communities.

For example Toko, began seeking alternative options after recognising that the repetitive nature of gang life failed to fulfil his emotional needs. Similarly, Kaha's disillusionment in gang politics increased his receptivity of his mother's invitation to attend church services. In both narratives, there was evidence of an internal struggle with self-imposed stigma before openly interacting with the religious group. However, once they took the first step towards this alternative role, its transformative elements began to exert its influence, gradually pulling participants out of the grip of the criminal gang.

So casually just walked across … walked back to the pad again. I did that 13 times. So, when I went back the 13th time, I opened the door and walked straight to the front when the service was starting. From there, I just had my head down and waited till the end and walked out. I did that about 13 times before I lifted my head up and looked at the preachers. (Toko)

Jesus wouldn't want a person like this anymore, mum. Maybe when I was younger but not now. Not if you've seen half of stuff what I have seen and done half of stuff that I'd been told that I have to do. ... but mum persisted, and one day she managed to get me to go to church ... So, I was still hungry after encountering God, it was just curiosity. Here is a church just around the corner from the pad. I walked in there to see what's going on in there, and see what's on their heart, and to see they are actually walking the truth ... Still didn't leave the gang eh, because it was just, that's what I knew and it's hard to walk away from what you know. (Kaha)

As previously noted, altered family circumstances was recurringly reported to have reoriented participants' attention, urging them to devote more time in these new roles. This altered focus sparked an internal conflict for Tane, who after the birth of his daughter, "*took a step back and stopped [engaging in the gang], because [he] started caring about going to jail, or not being there for [his] partner and daughter."* However, *"after like five or six months away,"* he made the decision to reengage with the gang, and he *"got his patch back again and then [he] had a son."*

Entering lawful employment was also a motivating factor for some participants to temporarily cease engagement in criminal gang activities. In the gang desistance literature, obtaining gainful employment is generally considered as a critical event that accelerates detachment from criminal gangs. However, in this study, employment did not always function as a catalyst for permanent life change. Instead, like in Ihaka's case, employment only temporarily fragmented his involvement in criminal gang activities,[51] because after he *"tried the normal way of life working,"* he quickly came to the conclusion that *"Fuck, this is hard."* So, he "*went back to prospect again"* in order to reobtain his membership.

[51]Obtaining gainful and meaningful employment will attain saliency in participants' next life phase, when they navigate the strains of criminal gang desistance maintenance (Chapter Seven, Other Deterrents, pp. 202-203)

In many instances, disillusionment with the gang lifestyle, or changes in personal circumstances, set in motion a process of experimentation with prosocial roles like a positive male and father figure or a lawful employee. While these newly acquired roles began to compete with gang identities and initiated a zig-zag movement between the gang and conventional worlds, at this stage, they were not influential enough to sever participants' criminal gang affiliation. However, exposure to appealing alternatives heightened participants' awareness of the negative aspects of the gang lifestyle, which in turn encouraged further withdrawal. As participants became more invested in new roles and consequently, less available to the gang, their waning commitment began to raise concern amongst other members.

Detection of Change and Temporary Gang Disengagement

The change in participants' priorities did not go unnoticed, and it often provoked fellow members' unpleasant and even hostile responses. This negative attention interrupted the adoption of prosocial roles due to the fear of instant sense of isolation from social, emotional, and financial benefits that the gang had guaranteed.

As Frank highlighted, he began concentrating more on his partner and her son, and *"became a bit of a rebel because he just wasn't turning up to the gang assemblies and it was pissing some of the other members off."* Neglecting gang expectations resulted in him getting *"punched over and [his] colours taken."* Yet this didn't deter him, ironically, he admitted that he *"kept getting drawn back to it [gang]"* with the intention to prospect again.

Participants like Rawiri, who overtly expressed his dissatisfaction with the gang dynamics, experienced similar consequences. After *"a falling out with the rangatira,"* Rawiri *"was stood down from the gang."* Although frustrated and convinced that he would never return, Rawiri eventually *"decided to step back into that space,"* because after being pushed out he *"still found [himself] representing the gang and stayed close with senior members."*

In Heta's case, the new outlook on life clashed with what was expected of him as a gang member. After completing the prison programme and returning to the gang he felt *"way too different to the boys,"* who treated him with disrespect due to his changed perspectives. This tension extended beyond group dynamics, as it affected Heta's sense of self, prompting him to reflect on *"a whole lot of new me,"* which gave rise to role conflict between his identities as a gang member and a prosocial and father figure.

The shift in commitment to the gang lifestyle did not go unnoticed. Often, overt dissatisfaction with the gang lifestyle or experimentation with new roles raised suspicions among other members about participants' loyalty. For several participants these events marked the beginning of an exit from criminal gang involvement. For others, gang disengagement was only temporary as attachments to the new prosocial roles were not yet fully developed. As Heta's experience demonstrates, remaining or returning to the gang with diminished commitment to its lifestyle, made it increasingly problematic to maintain membership status.

Internal Conflict

Exposure to more appealing alternatives outside the gang, led participants to seriously question whether the criminal gang lifestyle continued to meet their changing needs. Those who remained affiliated, despite an abated interest in gang activities, experienced significant internal turmoil, as they grappled with the decision whether to stay or leave.

Ihaka's return to the gang vividly illustrates this inner turmoil. He described waking up in distress, haunted by the thought: *"Fuck, I don't wanna do this anymore. How can I stop doing it?"* Despite this growing discontent, the lucrative exercise of daily drug dealing kept him entrenched and he felt he had *"fallen into a trap."* Frank shared similar sentiments of entrapment; however, in his case, this feeling arose from the absence of meaningful relationships or support outside the gang. Although he attempted to leave, boredom and

isolation led him to drift back, because *"half the time, there was nothing to do [so he] went there [gang pad], but each time [he] was disliking it more and more."*

Kaperiere offered a reflective metaphor that reinforced the experiences of Ihaka and Frank. While his own exit was relatively uncomplicated, he acknowledged that others' ability to disengage depended on the underlying reasons they joined in the first place. His analogy was insightful, as it illuminated the sense of entrapment that can keep members bound to the gang life regardless their faded commitment to continued involvement:

Here is a treasure chest, have a look at it, see the gems? Yeah. Here it can be yours just put that T-shirt on, come on and prospect. And I'd say: Sure. Once I put the T-shirt on. You see the treasure it's mine, you are mine too now. I'd say: I wanna leave. It's too late, they know how to get fear so I never leave brother, and this is it, it's a trap.

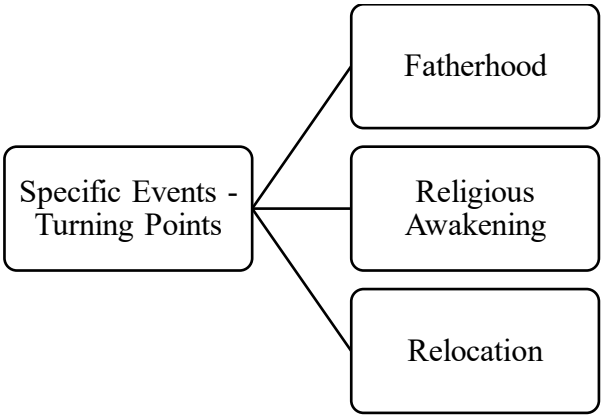
As a result of a series of externally stimulating events, participants' attitudes and approaches towards the demands of the gang life began to shift, prompting experimentation with alternative roles such as being a prosocial figure, a father, or a legitimate employee. Their declining interest and reduced availability to fulfil the gang's expectations did not go unnoticed, often provoking concern among fellow members. While such tensions compelled some participants to permanently sever ties, others decided to remain or return to the gang for the emotional, social, and financial benefits that gang membership conferred. For these participants, the gang was a familiar yet constraining environment, which generated internal conflict between the benefits and potential risks of continued involvement. However, this ambivalence was abruptly resolved when a seemingly pivotal event was encountered.

Specific Events – Turning Points

Participants' hesitancy to leave the gang was often followed by an abrupt exit process, which was typically precipitated by specific life events. Although the previous themes indicated that participants' commitment to the gang's normative practices and demands had already weakened (as shown in Figure 6. 4), events like fatherhood, religious awakening, and relocation emerged as key catalysts, because in participants' eyes, these moments carried sufficient weight to prompt a decisive break from their gang life. Consequently, participants regarded these events as turning points that alongside accelerating their exit, symbolised their transition into desistance.

Figure 6. 4

Turning Points



Fatherhood

Whereas the previous category demonstrated that changes in familial circumstances, such as the birth of the first child, could prompt participants to question their continued commitment to the gang member role, this section demonstrates how fatherhood was identified as a critical event that triggered a sudden exit from the gang. For several participants, becoming

a father, whether through the birth of the first or subsequent child, evoked an increased sense of responsibility to provide a safe and violence free environment, that was fundamentally incompatible with the demands and realities of the gang life.

This transformative sentiment is exemplified in Piri's statement, where he recounted that following the birth of his first son, he *"decided to leave, because he wanted the best for his son"* rather than risk exposing him to the inherent consequences of gang life. Similarly, Tane described the birth of his son as the *"final steppingstone"* in his gang exit process because it led him to permanently sever his ties with the gang.

While their stories reinforced the notion that becoming a father can act as an accelerator for gang disengagement, Afa offered a particularly poignant reflection on how parental roles can come into direct conflict with the gang lifestyle. Recalling the toll that his substance use and criminal behaviour took on his family, Afa offered the following reflection:

Our children were part of our journey. They were quite small and they could see me and my wife having difficulties with each other, as we were into drinking and drugs. We could see our children suffering. So I had a choice to make, if I'd carried on I'd probably end up in jail or in a box. It was my children that made me change my lifestyle, and it was my 6 years old daughter that helped me make the change and leave because I didn't want to see her miserable.

The threat of partners leaving or losing custody of children also featured as a prominent pull factor. For instance Pene's dissatisfaction with his membership status was initially sparked by the perceived lack of support from other members. However, it was in that moment when he saw his wife and their *"boy packed up and ready to go"* that he felt compelled to re-evaluate his options and "*do as she asked and leave [the gang]."*

Many participants regarded the birth of their first or subsequent child along with the responsibility of fulfilling positive parental roles, as a key motivator eliciting gang exit. These reflections show how demands of fatherhood offered a moral counterweight to the gang life. After assuming parental roles, participants became concerned about how risks and unpredictability of gang involvement may impact on their children's well-being. Thus, in seeking greater stability and safety for their children, they decided to leave the criminal gang life. Besides assuming parental responsibilities, participants described how (re)establishing religious connections sparked their desire to exit the gang.

Religious Awakening

As earlier quotes indicated, faith-based groups offered participants a sense of belonging, acceptance, and social support which became instrumental in bringing their disengagement from a criminal gang life to a conclusion. For several participants, the connection, purpose, and identity found in religious groups mirrored the very reasons that had initially drawn them into the gang. Toko's story illustrates this parallel, as he came to realise, after plucking up the courage to attend and engage in church services, that in his church community he was, in fact, accepted for who he was. Therefore, he "*kept going back"* and with each visit, his interactions with *"new lovely people"* left him feeling *"surrounded by a different kind of aroha, love*," which nurtured and reinforced his ties with this group.

Initially, Toatoa also hesitated to enter the church, pointing out that he "*hated Christians."* However, driven by strong motivation to transform his life, he accepted his wife's invitation to attend a church service. He continued returning and by "*the fourth time"* he considered himself spiritually transformed.

Toatoa's account of initial hesitation followed by a profound shift in religious alignment and moral orientation is echoed and further illustrated in Roa's narrative. In his reflection, Roa

brings attention to how embracing faith became a decisive turning point in his life course, which empowered him to find the determination to permanently sever ties with the gang life:

The day that I actually did leave them completely was, when I became a Christian. I knew at that stage, that I had to let everything go, and when I went to the church and made this commitment I came back and I said the end is here. And you know, different times they [gang members] would say to me: Come around bro. I said: No. Maybe one day but right now no. And I never went back.

Participants' accounts revealed that religious conversion was often perceived as the ultimate reason for exiting the gang. As faith-based communities provided instant alternatives such as a sense of social inclusion, belonging, acceptance, and later purpose, they were regarded as a protective buffer against reengagement with the gang life. This transition, therefore, represented more than just a need for a lifestyle change, it also symbolised a moral and existential reorientation. In other instances, relocation functioned as a preventive measure to resist the gang culture's strong social pull.

Relocation

Relocation, either to another ANZ region or overseas, was also identified as a deliberate strategic solution for seeking to exit and sever links with the gang. Similarly to other specific events, relocation was rarely a decision made in a spur of a moment. Instead, it symbolised that over time participants had reached a tipping point of dissatisfaction with the gang role demands. The recognition that continued gang association would be inevitable without a drastic change, prompted relocation. Relocating disrupted entrenched gang-related routines and cut emotional ties with members. It also provided an opportunity to start anew, reassess goals, build connections with non-gang communities, and feel free from pressures of the former role.

After a period of oscillation and intense internal conflict about further involvement in criminal gang activity, Ihaka's desire for a fresh start was evident in his decision to move away from his hometown. He explained that he had reached a point where he chose "*to relocate to another [New Zealand region] to help pulling [himself] out of the gang."* Ānaru's reflections further reinforce this sentiment, by outlining how his doubts and hesitancy about staying in the gang were resolved through relocation. His account also provides a glimpse into the lengthy journey of gang desistance that awaited him after exiting the gang, this ongoing process explored in more detail in the following chapter:

I spent some time in prison, and that helped me kind of decide this is not the life I wanted to continue to live. So I left the country, and I went to Australia I found that being over there for about four years, was long enough for me to de-gangify my mind. I went back to using my real name, it took me a couple of years to respond to that name[52].

Although relocation was often identified as a specific event, it arose from a series of prior negative experiences and external pressures. These compounded stressors associated with the determinantal consequences of gang life, sparked participants' decision to move to another region within ANZ or overseas. Relocation had a dual purpose: it functioned as a preventive measure against reengagement with the gang and as an opportunity to start a new life.

This category sought to illuminate specific events that participants viewed and described as catalysts for persistent gang exit, or in other words a turning point in their gang-centric life trajectory. As dissatisfaction with the gang grew and the symbolic glory of gang membership status faded, participants became more receptive to alternative roles outside the

[52]The way Ānaru viewed himself when he was actively engaging with a gang, is discussed in Chapter Five, under the theme of Identifying as a Gang Member (pp. 152-153).

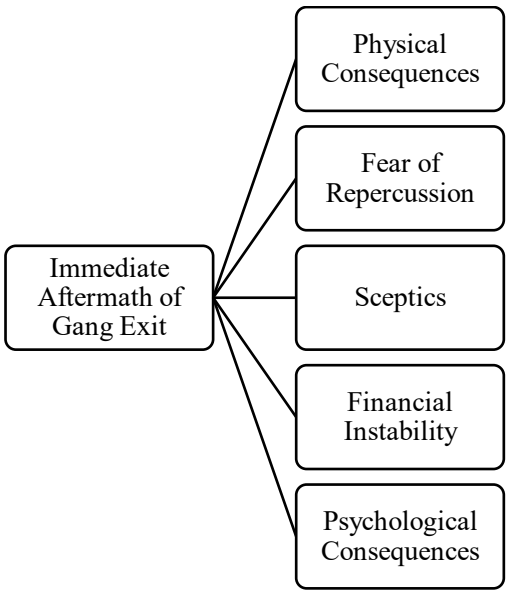
gang. In most instances, the appeal of new roles fused with circumstantial changes gradually eroded or even terminated participants' interest in engaging in criminal activities well before the specific events of fatherhood, spiritual awakening, and relocation occurred. However, from the participants' perspective, these critical moments triggered an abrupt criminal gang exit and become symbolic markers of the onset of their desistance process. The following section explores this new life phase, which typically began with the immediate consequences of gang exit characterised by adversity, a bleak outlook, and substantial psychological upheaval.

Immediate Aftermath of Gang Exit

Figure 6. 5 presents an overview of various immediate consequences participants faced upon declaring their wish to leave the gang. After participants expressing their intention, they were either subjected to severe physical assault, verbal threat, or scepticism about their ability to survive without the gang's financial and social support. While disengagement freed participants from gang's demands, it frequently resulted in financial difficulties, loss of long-standing social networks, and in some instances, called forth considerable emotional distress.

Figure 6. 5

Gang Exit Consequences



Physical Consequences

Participants' most vivid and emotionally charged accounts of exiting detailed experiences of severe physical violence. Several participants were aware and often anticipated that declaring their intention to exit would provoke a violent response such as being gang bashed. While this looming threat of violence generated immense fear, participants were prepared to endure aggression in pursuit of a new life. Kaha's quote powerfully captured this harsh reality, as he, despite intense anxiety, summoned the courage to face the *"walk-out"* process (a phrase borrowed from him and used throughout this thesis):

It is very scary stepping into that, and it took me a while to find that strength, and the courage to step out and talk to my sergeant in arm that this is not the life I wanted anymore … It was a walk-out. That's what they call it, they call it a walk-out and you gotta walk the line … So when I did my walk-out, it was only my sergeant at arms that gave me the hiding. He told the boys:

You do not touch him he is my job. He beat me up pretty black and blue … I ended up getting knocked out and losing a couple of teeth in the process, but he stayed by my hospital bed.

By choosing their families over the gang life, both Pene and Tane made the critical decision to leave the gang. As a result they also had to endure the walk-out process. Their accounts, therefore, suggest that it is a normalised gang exit ritual across various gang contexts. When Tane was asked to elaborate on how the gang responded to his wish to exit, he explained: *"I ended up in hospital for three weeks, but I was expecting it [beating]."* Strikingly identical was Pene's answer, however, providing slightly mor insight into his walk-out experience:

…they didn't take it too well, but it's a process really. Yeah, and I knew it was coming, and they knew it was coming. A good beating came as you can see by my beautiful dental construction.

Immediately after announcing intention to leave, some participants were subjected to severe physical abuse. They often anticipated this response, because they knew it was part of their gang's exit ritual. In other cases, as a result of expressing desire to leave, participants became targets of verbal intimidation, including threats of future violence.

Fear of Repercussion

Some participants, while expecting violent responses, were confronted through verbal intimidation that produced ongoing fear of repercussions. Typically, these participants managed to evade physical assaults because of their close friendships with, or past deeds carried out for high ranking members. However, the fear of potential retaliation persisted in constant state of unease. For example, after declining the offer to *"patch up"* and leaving the gang, Ānaru decided to "*go underground for a little while, because [he] wasn't too sure what [his] status was on the streets anymore."* As he explained he knew he *"offended a few people by getting*

out" particularly the president, but he was *"more worried about the actual patch members that could do something to"* him for disrespecting the gang and its leaders.

Close emotional relationships with high ranking members often spared participants from physical retaliation. For instance, Piripi's gang engagement was initiated through an invitation from his long-term childhood friend, who later became the president of a local gang. While this relationship saved Piripi from the violent walk-out process, he admitted, he did not *"feel totally safe just bailing out,"* as he was worried that one day an active member may question: *"Oh yeah, how come he can walk away, and nothing happens to him?"*

Similarly to Piripi, Iwi was spared from violence because of his strong friendship with one of the leaders; however, he was also concerned about future consequences:

I was actually thinking, oh yeah there is going to be some repercussions, but fortunately there was like nothing at all. I was just fortunate that the sergeant of arms, pretty much calling the shots and we were close. Otherwise, it would have been worse … Like right now, nothing's happened for all these years. I am guessing it will stay that way, but I am not 100% sure.

Participants' accounts suggested that circumventing the gang's walk-out process at the time of leaving did not guarantee protection from potential future physical confrontations with former associates. The threat of being assaulted kept participants on the edge and hypervigilant long after they left the gang. On other occasions, fellow members responded in condescending manner, doubting participants' ability to maintain life without the gang's assistance.

Sceptics

Other members' cynical remarks were also commonly experienced when participants announced their intention to leave the gang. Participants with strong gang ties and deep embeddedness encountered fellow members' scepticism about their ability to manage life

without the gang's economic and social support. This pessimism was particularly evident in Ihaka's uncles' response to his desire to exit:

My uncles laughed at my face and said: Good luck, go and try it … but remember the door is always open here. And I will see you in a year or so. … It wasn't a laugh of disrespect, but it was a laugh of: Yeah whatever, you don't know anything else, bro … Ultimately, I got a lot of hate for pulling myself out of it, from all my peers and some of my family.

Similarly, Tāmati as a long-term member, noted *"because of [his] reputation and respect that they did have for [him]"* for serving lengthy prison sentences on behalf of senior members, he was spared from violent exit rituals. While the president of the gang accepted his decision*, "a lot of the [other members] didn't, and they said: You'll be back, we give you a couple of weeks, we give you three months."*

These accounts demonstrate that, on the one hand, well-established intra-gang relationships reduced the likelihood of participants being subjected to violence upon exit; on the other hand, they elicited other members' cynical responses doubting participants' ability to establish a meaningful life outside the gang. While such disparaging remarks were unpleasant, in some cases, these predictions became the reality. The last two themes of this chapter examine these forecasted challenges that manifested in participants' economic and psychological difficulties immediately following gang disengagement.

Financial Instability

Leaving the gang without establishing alternative support or securing employment was a destabilising experience, resulting in significant financial instability for participants. Those with long-standing gang membership were often deeply entangled in the gang's illicit

economies. As Kaperiere's reflection illustrates, the prospect of facing economic fallout from losing access to the gang's financial benefits acted as a powerful inhibitor to exit:

Imagine you are getting just for knocking on that door, getting hundreds and that's it, that's your lifestyle for years. And now you are getting confronted, it became unreal. Leave that? Wait, what? Why? No, it's the easiest life ever. Leave that and start working, why?

However, as participants reached a critical threshold with the gang's internal dynamics, they were willing to overlook the economic implications in favour of personal changes. As it was reflected in Pene's account, prior to exiting, he was aware that he would not only need to endure the walk-out process but also would *"lose membership privileges."* This meant that he could not anymore *"just walk into certain parts of town, to wear [gang colour], or go into a night club and throw up [a gang hand signal] and get a free beer."*

Both Heta and Kaia reflected on the material consequences of gang exit, particularly their difficulty surrounding the sudden loss of financial security and adjustment to conventional lifestyle. While Heta narrative implies that this disruption generated a profound realisation of life without the gang's support and engendered feelings of disempowerment:

I used to rob tinny houses, rip off other gang houses, smash all their members, take all their drugs, take all their money, never had money problems, just taken whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted. Now all that's gone, I gotta go to work, not on big money. (Heta)

Kaia reflected on how that the financial instability experienced post-gang exit could trigger intense emotional strain and internal conflict:

I had to make a lot of sacrifice, after I left there was times when I really struggled financially; the temptation was really hard to get over, not to go back to the old life, but I persevered. (Kaia)

The immediate consequence of gang disengagement also entailed losing access to lucrative financial and material benefits, which left participants facing economic hardship. These financial challenges alone created internal conflict, but when compounded with the loss of social networks, they significantly undermined participants' overall well-being. Their initial psychological reactions to the absence of material and relational support are examined in the subsequent section, while the broader implications of these strains, which hindered efforts to effectively maintain desistance, are explored in the following chapter, under the theme of Adversities (pp. 199-200).

Psychological Consequences

Alongside financial difficulties, gang exit also exposed some participants to a heightened sense of social isolation. The loss of long-standing social and emotional attachments resulted in participants' social and identity anchors being suspended, thereby generating a sense of social vacuum. For those participants who lacked newly established roles and connections in conventional communities, this void gave rise to a psychological turmoil.

This was evident in Pene's and Ānaru's narratives, where the realisation that leaving the gang meant not only that their *"privileges were gone"* (Pene), but that they had also *"lost a bunch of friends,"* which *"felt like losing a bit of a family"* (Ānaru). The recognition that the family-like bonds had disintegrated after leaving the gang prompted feelings of identity loss, which in turn caused participants to become *"depressed for a long time"* (Pene).

While these narratives underscore the concept of this theme, Tane's reflection offers a nuanced elaboration on this topic. His account vividly illustrates how the aftermath of gang

exit can induce emotional instability in the absence of the gang's social network and connections within the wider conventional world:

These are the people I was spending nearly a decade with in every single day in my life. ... So, leaving them and so suddenly not having that, it's pretty hard, man. When I left the club, I went through like a really deep depression. I guess I call it a bad anxiety.

After leaving the gang, participants lost access to the gang's social network and its material and financial benefits. The resulting sense of social and emotional alienation was exacerbated by the lack of clearly defined conventional goals or new social connections. This brought forth a feeling of being in a social vacuum that manifested as psychological distress.

Participants' narratives revealed that exiting the gang carried a multitude of immediate consequences affecting their physical, psychological, and financial well-being. The most graphic of these repercussions was what Kaha described as the *"walk-out"* process, or a ritualised act of violence that served as punishment for leaving. In addition to physical assault, participants were subjected to verbal threats and scepticism regarding their ability to succeed outside the gang. Beyond these overt and often hostile responses, the indirect consequences were equally challenging. Severing ties with the gang meant losing access to its criminal economy and social networks. As a result of financial, social, and emotional isolation, participants experienced internal distress. As discussed in the next chapter, this emotional upheaval emerged as a barrier to sustaining gang desistance, as it undermined participants' confidence and sparked doubts about the feasibility of a gang free life.

Conclusion

The chapter presented how participants' gang exit process unfolded. Their narratives reveal that gang exit was not a product of a sudden and abrupt decision. Instead, it was a drawn out evaluative process initiated by growing disillusionment with gang dynamics, repeated and lengthy imprisonment, participation in cultural and therapeutic programmes, and changes in family and health circumstances. These often cumulatively occurring events drove participants to become more receptive and available for alternative roles.

Experimentation with new roles, such as becoming a prosocial figure, a father, or a legitimate employee, often clashed with the demands of the gang role. The shift in participants' priorities raised concerns among members and resulted in the suspension of their membership. Those, who remained or returned to the gang despite diminished interest, began oscillating between the gang and conventional worlds until specific life events intervened.

This study found that participants regarded fatherhood, spiritual awakening, and relocation as turning points because these events carried sufficient weight to accelerate criminal gang disengagement. However, as these events were intertwined with and directly originated from earlier experiences, that commonly prompted participants to question their continued gang involvement, they could not be viewed isolated and standalone catalysts.

In the wake of expressing the desire to leave, participants frequently endured the gang's punitive responses such as violent walk-out rituals, verbal threats, and scepticism about their ability to manage life without the gang's support. Such predictions proved to be accurate, as by exiting, participants lost access to the gang's financial and social safety nets, which triggered a sense of social isolation, financial insecurity, and psychological distress.

While these experiences initially prompted regret and ambivalence about leaving, the gradual disentanglement from the emotionally and fiscally binding gang connections and the establishment of new goals, roles, and social relationships, brought relief from the stresses

associated with gang disengagement. The following chapter explores how participants, during desistance, employed stigma coping strategies to navigate challenges in new environments and accomplish desired conventional goals.

Chapter Seven

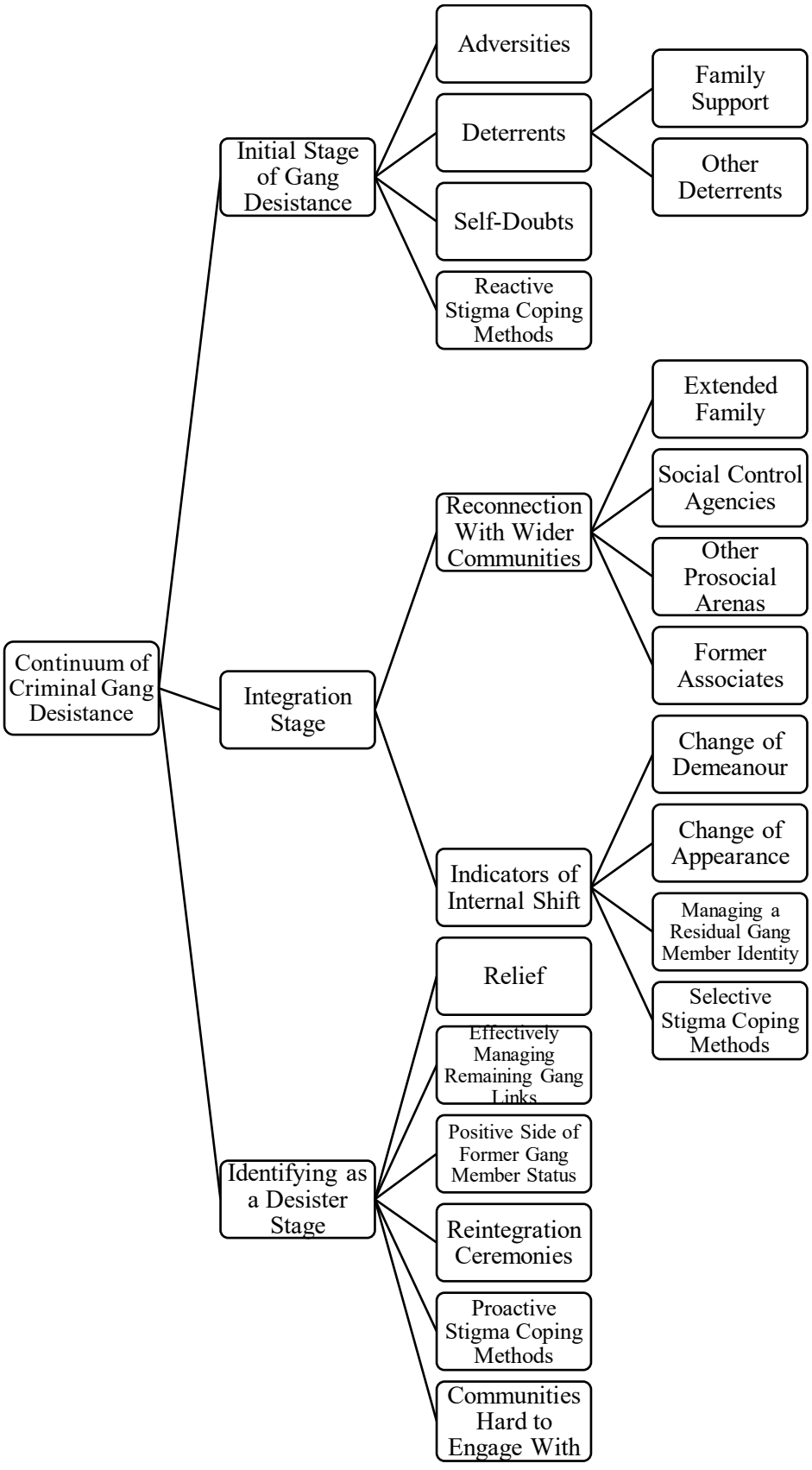
The Continuum of Criminal Gang Desistance

This chapter begins with the introduction to the criminal gang desistance continuum concept, which refers to the gradual and long-term nature of desistance maintenance. The chapter, then proceeds to a detailed discussion of participants' progression through the desistance process. As displayed in Figure 7. 1, the three interconnecting categories namely the initial, integration, and the identification as a desister stages represent the core components of the criminal gang desistance maintenance continuum.

The first category comprises of themes, which highlight the challenges participants encountered and the stigma coping methods they utilised to achieve desired goals in the early stage of gang desistance. The second category is divided into two parts: participants' reconnection with wider community and the indicators of their internal shifts. While the first part explores participants' efforts in reconnecting with various social groups, the second part describes how their reintegration stimulated personal transformation, reflected in appearance, behaviours, and adoption of improved stigma management methods. The final category addresses participants' identification as desisters, which marks an accomplished assimilation into the fabric of conventional society. This category is depicted through accounts arranged into themes of relief from exit related stresses, effective management of remaining gang links, the positive side of former gang member status, participation in reintegration ceremonies, the adoption of proactive stigma management style, and communities hard to engage with.

Figure 7. 1

Towards Adopting a Desister Identity



Gang Desistance Continuum

Before delving into a discussion about the intricacies of gang desistance process, it is necessary to emphasise that participants' perspectives and experiences indicated that gang desistance was a constantly evolving process during which they reprioritised role commitments to reflect their adoption of a criminal gang desister identity. To achieve the ultimate goal, which was to fully reintegrate into the conventional society without being scrutinised for one's former self, participants invested a considerable amount of time into this process. Therefore, understanding gang desistance as a constantly evolving dynamic process (reflecting a series of steps of personal transformation) embedded in time lends itself to be viewed as a continuum.

The quotes selected for this section are organised chronologically to highlight the important role of time (that varied in length for each participant), and the tenacity required to secure validation and acceptance in conventional groups. As reflected in Tane's account, who, among all interviewees, most recently exited the gang, the perception of validation was instrumental in reinforcing commitment to alternative roles and maintaining desistance from the criminal gang life. His relatively recent disengagement, coupled with his facial gang tattoo positioned him uniquely to provide a detailed account of how the acute public scrutiny and contempt directed toward his past-self affected his psychological state. Although Tane affirmed his commitment to desistance, his admission that social reactions elevated his temptation to return to the gang for status and security had only "*sort of passed,"* indicated a lingering ambivalence about maintaining desistance, at the time of our interview:

I guess when I feel like people treat me in a certain way, if I was still in the gang, and they wouldn't treat me like that or wouldn't be able to talk to me like that. I guess, yeah, some days, like even up until few months ago that was happening constantly where I'd be like: I just wanted to go back to the gang or join another gang. But yeah, that sort of passed me now.

Taki's narrative demonstrated that maintaining transformation in return to be accepted as a reformed individual, is an enduring process that takes a significant amount of time. His *"journey of doing things positively started seven to eight years ago … but for three and a half to five years"* he encountered *"heaps of negativity from all sorts."* While the ongoing external scrutiny took a psychological toll, his perseverance in maintaining criminal gang desistance eventually paid off. As he noted *"in the last eight months… I started to feel free of getting tried and tested all the time,"* signalling a growing sense of relief stemming from increased recognition and acceptance in his wider social environment.

Although Heta did not specify when his temptation subsided, he spoke of "*nine years"* of resisting the allure of gang lifestyle during which he admitted that he *"often wanted to"* return to drinking, smoking, and offending. While his statements show that resistance to relapse was part of a gradual adjustment, a firm commitment to prosocial role demands is reflected in his following remark: "*They can have all their money in the world, all the drugs on the table, I won't change."*

Manu's reflection provided a window into the cognitive challenges inherent in transitioning from a criminal identity to a prosocial one. His internal struggle, deriving from his gang embeddedness, could be directly linked to his formative experiences in his familial and spatial contexts that heavily influenced his past behaviours. His quote articulates the nonlinear nature of cognitive transformation linked to his gang desistance journey:

I had to stop thinking like a criminal and that was, how can I put it. It wasn't like: OK from this point forward I am not going to commit crimes. It took some time, because it was really hard bro… So yeah, there was some huge changes that needed to happen but mainly in my thinking.

Tāmati, one of the oldest interviewees, found it difficult to recall the challenges of his early desistance period. This difficulty in recollection may have been influenced by his age, but it is also possible that the passage of time contributed to blurring the memory of adverse events. His reflection hints that the longer one sustains desistance, the more familiar, thus, more comfortable they become with the demands of the conventional role.

I was 33. That's how old I was, when I came to the Lord. I probably had challenges earlier on, but I can't really remember it. I suppose, if I ever had a big wobbly, maybe, but I can't recall ever chucking my toys out of the cot. It's been a long time.

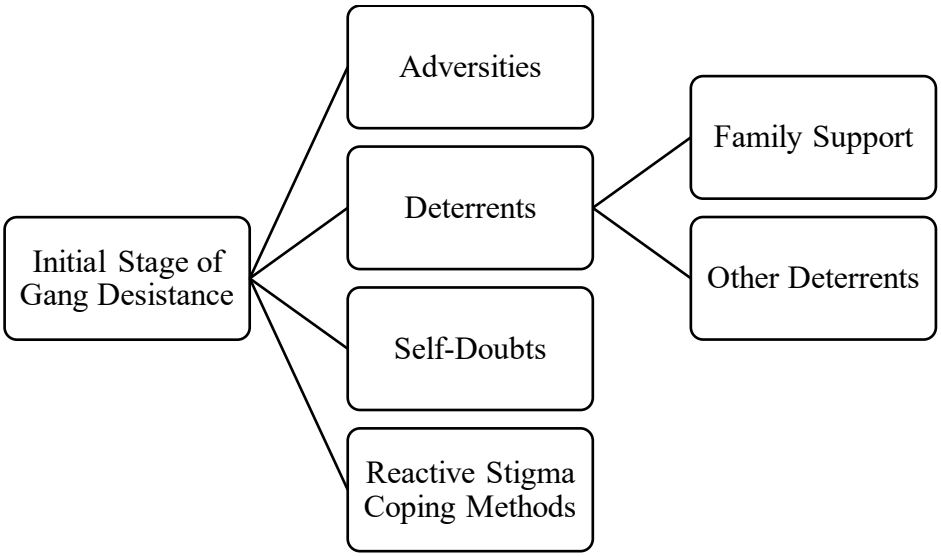
Information gathered from participants, illustrated that gang desistance maintenance was an ongoing and evolving process that varied in time. As evident in Tane's story, setbacks related to the loss of status, emotional, social, and financial support, as well as ongoing public scrutiny were commonly experienced in the early stages of gang desistance. However, as detailed in the accounts of Taki, Heta, and Manu, with the passage of time and sustained commitment to desistance, these initial complications abated. Moreover, long-term maintenance of gang desistance seemed to anchor participants in their prosocial roles, and the passage of time slowly erased their memories of earlier challenges. The following three categories, through their respective themes, dissect this process and discuss in detail how participants' commitment to gang free lifestyle, alongside the strategic use of stigma management techniques, helped the attainment of their desired goals and fostered a progression across the stages of the gang desistance continuum.

Initial Stage of Gang Desistance

Following the immediate consequences of gang exit, both external and internal factors, often interconnectedly, played an equally important role in manipulating participants' approaches to desistance maintenance and selection of stigma management style in the early stages of gang desistance. These interconnected risk and protective factors are illustrated in Figure 7. 2. The themes of adversities and self-doubts illuminate that structural barriers and internal struggles that drove participants to contemplate or even briefly reengage with criminal gang life. However, protective factors such as family support and other stabilising influences accessed through reactive stigma management methods, functioned as deterrents against regression and encouraged the sustained maintenance of gang desistance.

Figure 7. 2

The Initial Stage of Desistance



Adversities

Most participants reported encountering some type of roadblocks either immediately or shortly after leaving the gang. Early desistance adversities varied amongst participants, but most pertained to status loss, primarily arising from financial insecurity and the absence of social support. Participants' narratives consistently highlighted that these external pressures were critical in giving rise to temptations to revert to criminal lifestyle.

Although several participants described adverse post-exit circumstances, Iwi's story is presented to portray them. His account encapsulates the persistent and detrimental outcomes of gang exit struggle which produced uncertainty about the sustainability of desistance:

I was looking for anything [any work], that would take me because I was on the benefit, and I wasn't doing nothing at all. That was first time in my life when I was pretty much doing nothing, usually making money somewhere, but I was literally doing nothing. I didn't have a bike, I didn't have a car, I used to walk to town.

"*Mainly in the first month"* after leaving the gang, Iwi encountered significant difficulties in accomplishing conventional goals such as obtaining stable employment. The lack of access to necessary financial resources and opportunities "*because of [his] criminal record and gang history"* elevated his sense of disenfranchisement, which prompted his following thoughts: *"Far out, nothing is working here, so I might as well go back to the gang, because that's what was working."*

The absence of clearly established conventional goals also proved to be detrimental. For example, in the absence of direction and tangible objectives, both Pene and Ānaru experienced mounting frustration over their financial circumstances following gang exit. This stress gradually gave way to reengagement in criminal activities:

I was seeping back into selling drugs to make money, and buying and selling stolen goods, things like that. Anything I could do to keep the lights on, you know. During the first year after leaving the gang, I thought a lot about going back into it. (Pene)

Trying to get money led me to kind of recoiling back into a street gang. So not really doing the adult gang stuff from being affiliated with patch members every day, back to: Let's affiliate with hustlers, drug dealers, and street peddlers, let's just go back to the street level of it. (Ānaru)

In the early stage of gang desistance, participants commonly faced adverse circumstances that often extended from the immediate consequences of gang exit. The prolonged absence of social network support, the persistent barriers to employment, and continued financial instability produced a deepening sense of social isolation and status loss. In an attempt to stabilise their financial situation, some participants reconsidered or actively reengaged in profit-making criminal activities. While this section illustrated how adverse experiences in the early stage of gang desistance drew participants back into the criminal gang lifestyle, the following section explores external factors that deterred them from fully reinstating their former roles as a criminal gang member.

Deterrents

Participants often narrated that their gradual regression into the gang life was diverted by various external influences. The key sources of discouragement for gang re-entry were participants' immediate support networks such as spouses and parents. Access to conventional goals, and in some instances, dissuasion from former gang associates were also cited as factors encouraging persistence in the desistance journey. Based on the nature of these influences, this section is split into two subthemes: the family support and the other deterrents.

Family Support

Several participants reported that, in the face of initial challenges, immediate family members' support served as a scaffolding mechanism that helped sustain their commitment to desistance. For example, during the initial stages when challenges were particularly abundant, Taki's *"really supportive wife that was someone that believed in him"* was his primary source of motivation to *"give it a chance to try and see what it would be like to do the right thing."*

Kaha attributed his mother's constant encouragement to helping him recognise his "*true identity and true purpose to find God."* Although Kaha successfully exited the gang, as will be discussed in the upcoming theme of Other Deterrents (pp. 202-203), personal hardship later revived his interest in returning to the gang life. In this instance, not only did his mother's spiritual guidance and support that assist him in remaining gang free, but other deterrents also played a crucial role.

In Pene's case, his mother's request for help with her studies interrupted his gradual drift back into the criminal gang life, as it presented an opportunity to earn legitimate income. Pene's account, therefore, underscores that family connections together with access to conventional opportunities can function as a powerful hook for facilitating lasting gang disengagement. Furthermore, in the following quote, his reflections draw attention to his initial self-doubt regarding his ability to carry out academic tasks as a former gang member, a subject that is explored more fully in the upcoming theme of Self-Doubts (pp. 203-204).

What happened was my mum was studying to become a Māori counsellor and because she writes slow, she asked if she could have a notetaker and they said: No, we can't provide you one from here because you don't have a disability but if you can get somebody come and take your notes, we can do that. So my mum came to see me and said: I am doing this paper. And I was like: Oh yeah good on you. And she said: Do you wanna come up and take my notes? And

I was like: Why the fuck do I wanna do that? I am an ex-gang member, I've got no money, I've got no job, no certificates anything. And she said: Oh well, there is money involved. And I said: Oh yeah? Will see you tomorrow then.

During the initial phases of desistance, support from immediate family members played a crucial role in deterring participants from reverting to active engagement in criminal activities. Ongoing encouragement from significant others not only aided participants' upkeep of desistance but also reinforced their self-confidence. In turn, this family support indirectly cultivated (re)connections with wider conventional communities. However, alongside immediate family members, other external agents featured in participants' narratives, as influential deterrents against regression into criminal gang life.

Other Deterrents

Other deterring factors that participants credited as assistance to abstain from re-entering criminal gang style included discouragement from former associates and the crystallisation and accessibility of conventional goals. As noted earlier, periods of financial hardship and other existential challenges propelled participants back to the gang. In these moments, some sought out former associates (generally someone with whom they built a strong bond during their time in the gang) to explore the possibility of rejoining. For instance, when Kaha approached the gang's sergeant of arms to discuss his potential return, he received the following answer: *"Why would you want to come back. God's done so much for you, bro. Are you sure you wanna walk down this pit of darkness with me? Because there is no turning back, bro."* These reflections on the challenges associated with resumed gang membership dissuaded Kaha from re-entering the gang.

Similarly, Pene, who also contemplated returning was advised by a senior patch member: *"Bro, don't come back here. If you were going to leave, make something of yourself,*

as you may as well stayed, and then your hiding would be for nothing." This personal advice from someone Pene respected served as a powerful deterrent from pursuing the gang life again.

On the other hand, the mere realisation or attainment of conventional goals gave participants a sense of purpose, reducing their desire to reengage with the gang. For instance, financial instability and a dearth of supportive social network led Iwi to contemplate returning to the gang. However, this trajectory was halted when he secured employment, and more importantly, was accepted into an educational programme. These developments offered not only material support but also structure, routine, and a sense of purpose, which collectively helped the development of a new identity outside the gang context:

I wasn't studying at that time, when I was having those thoughts [of returning], I wasn't doing anything really, but I got accepted into a course. That's what I had to keep telling myself. In my head, I was already there, my mind was like: Nah, nah, I've got something to look forward to.

Participants identified multiple external factors that they believed to prevent them from *"seeping back into"* (Pene) some form of criminal gang activity. These deterrents included the immediate family members' encouragement, the dissuasion of trusted former associates, and the accessibility of desired conventional opportunities. While these deterrents helped curb the inclination to reengage in criminal gang life, some participants continued to harbour uncertainty about their social standing. This ambiguity about their abilities often compromised or dulled participants' confidence to fully enter in conventional spaces and activities.

Self-Doubts

Years of engagement in delinquent behaviours generated deep-seated doubts about possessing social skills necessary to engage with prosocial community members, let alone secure a career in conventional settings. The anticipation of social stigma enhanced

participants' insecurities, particularly when assuming conventional roles such as an employee, student, or volunteer. As demonstrated earlier in Toko's reflection (p. 173), it took him *"13 times before [he] actually opened the door and walked straight to the front [of the church]."*

Rawiri's experience resonated with Toko's account, because when he was about to start his new role, he was *"really nervous"* and he "*almost pulled out."* However, with his partner's support he managed to overcome his anxiety and reassure himself that he *"can do this."*

Self-doubt also influenced participants' confidence in enrolling in educational programmes. Past negative experience with education along with the internalised social stigma, led to questioning academic abilities. Pene, for example, *"always knew"* he "*wanted to help people,"* but lacked the confidence to enrol into a course because he did not believe he *"was capable of studying [and securing employment] in helping sector."* Frank also selected a course that required *"less attention, less work"* because he *"didn't know whether [he] was going to be good enough"* to complete a higher level paper.

In the initial stages of gang desistance, participants often doubted their social skills and abilities necessary for roles in social sectors or educational programmes. However, once employed in helping sector or enrolled in tertiary education programmes, their focus shifted on managing anticipated and enacted stigma.

Reactive Stigma Coping Methods

To accomplish meaningful conventional goals, participants often relied on reactive stigma management strategies. In new settings like workplaces or tertiary institutions, participants often concealed their past affiliations to avoid or mitigate the impact of anticipated social stigma. Other reactive methods included withdrawal or avoiding attention. Such defensive tactics, especially concealment, enabled participants like Ihaka to secure employment opportunities:

So, initially did you talk about your affiliation with your colleagues? (Interviewer)

Nah, I didn't, … so we were working at a non-violence men's centre and in the youth branch in that men's centre. So I didn't want them and my boss to think: Look this guy he is just like the people that we work with. And so, it was why I kept it to myself. (Ihaka)

Ānaru also adopted concealment strategies, admitting that *"for the first 10 years, after prison,"* he withheld information about his convictions and former gang affiliation when applied for jobs. Rather than pre-emptively disclosing his past, he relied on secrecy during the interviews, because he hoped that *"certain things weren't asked."* He justified the use of this reactive method by telling himself: *"Oh if I just don't tell them, it's not the same as lying."*

In tertiary education settings, participants also employed reactive stigma management strategies, most frequently using avoidance of interactions, though concealment tactics were also applied. For example, Roa deliberately relocated to a different city to pursue his studies. He stated this move helped him prevent *"too much attention"* from those who used to know him, because if he wanted to finish his course, it was in his best interest to *"keep to himself … and become a recluse."* Similarly, Pene described that making *"a conscious decision of sticking to"* himself, and choosing to disclose his background after making *"friends in his class,"* helped him navigate the new social context until he overcame his fear of being judged.

Because Tane's facial tattoo was *"not hidden yet,"* he felt compelled to disclose his former criminal gang affiliation. However, as he pointed out, he would "*be a bit more cautious about [disclosing his past] once [his] tattoos were gone."* This stance suggests his preference for reactive stigma management.

In the early phases of gang desistance, participants commonly applied reactive stigma management strategies to increase their chances of achieving desired conventional goals. Even

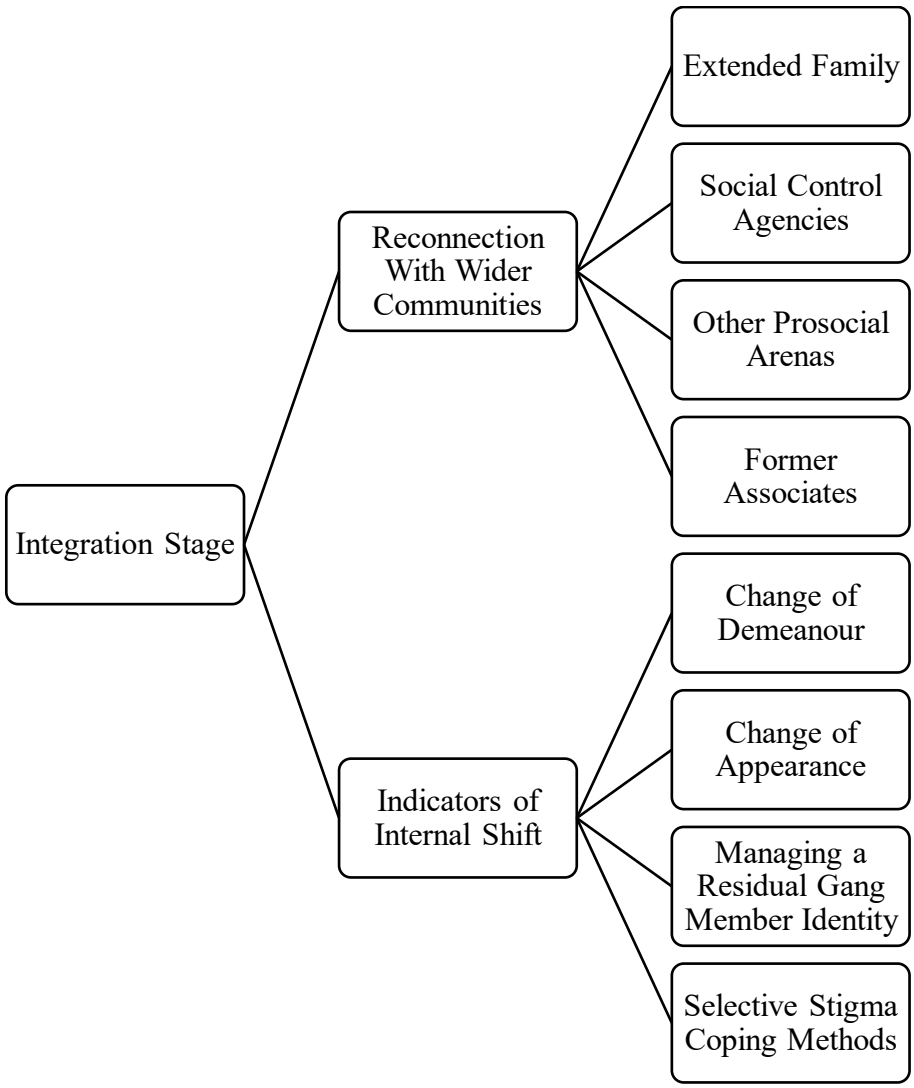
after enrolment into tertiary courses or obtainment of gainful employment, the use of reactive methods persisted. Concealment and limiting social interactions became tools to alleviate and navigate situations where past gang involvement could invite scrutiny or judgement. However, as participants spent more time within these environments, a growing sense of familiarity and acculturation led them to adopt less reactive responses to potential stigma.

Integration Stage

This category addresses how participants integrated into prosocial networks. As presented in Figure 7. 3, the category consists of two interconnected themes, the reconnection with wider communities and the indicators of internal shift. The first theme, also displayed in Figure 7. 4, is further divided into subthemes, which together provide a comprehensive account of how (re)engagement in and validation within various (pro)social networks such as extended family, social control agencies, other prosocial arenas, and even former associates fostered participants' commitment to further integration into range of new conventional settings. Complementing these contextual changes, subthemes also extracted into Figure 7. 5, signal participants' internal transformations, including changes in demeanour and appearance, management of residual gang identity, and adoption of selective stigma coping method. Collectively, these two themes illuminate the reciprocal relationship between external influences and internal adjustments, highlighting their perpetual interactions that shape and sustain criminal gang desistance.

Figure 7. 3

Markers of Social Integration



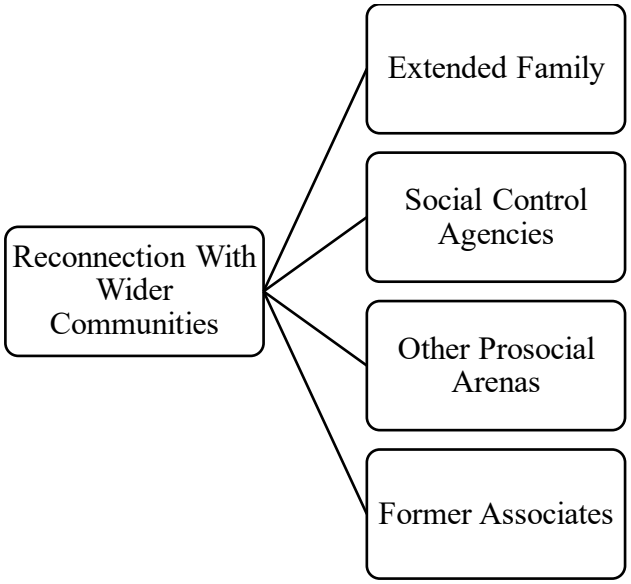
Reconnection With Wider Communities

The first theme of the integration category, along with its subthemes, brings attention to how participants' continued engagement in conventional roles (employee, student, or faith worker) anchored their desistance maintenance. As shown in Figure 7. 4, the first subtheme examines participants' reconciliation efforts with estranged extended familial members. The

subsequent subthemes provide an insight into how building connection with social control agencies, integrating into broader social arenas, and repairing relations with former associates supported desistance from gang life.

Figure 7. 4

Reconnection With Wider Communities



Extended Family

Participants' previously eroded relationships with prosocial extended family members only began to mend following sustained demonstration of adherence to the conventional role demands. Unlike immediate family, who were more emotionally invested and quick to offer support, extended relatives generally maintained a more sceptical view of participants' genuine transformation. Therefore, reconciliation with extended family members required rigorous efforts over a prolonged period

Tāmati's account illustrates the challenge of reconciling with extended family, as after his aunt disowned him for "*influencing her son to join the gang…it took her nearly 10 years*

before she accepted that [he]'d changed." Pene also recalled facing considerable difficulties to rebuild kinship ties, noting that after leaving "*the gang [he] had to reintegrate with [his] family and reconnect with them."*

As noted in Chapter Five (p. 151), Tane lost contact with much of his wider family following his entry into the gang. His reflections, as the most recently desisted participant, highlight the enduring implications of gang affiliation on prosocial familial ties. Despite his genuine efforts toward gang desistance, his attempts to rebuild relationship with extended relatives remained partial and limited:

Only one member of my family I've reconciled with, my mum's brother, my uncle which I was close with beforehand [entering the gang]. Like, I grew up staying at his house, he stayed at my house, he looked after me when I was a little kid, I reconciled with him and his partner.

These accounts collectively highlight how reintegration into the wider family network was seldom immediate or complete. Reconciliation with extended familial relationships was often contingent on ongoing demonstration of prosocial change. Yet, ironically, to secure roles within the social or faith-based sectors that signalled such change, participants often found themselves formulating relationships with state or community-based institutions that they had rejected or distrusted in the past.

Social Control Agencies (Police, Probation, and Corrections)

The expansion of participants' social networks included the intentional establishment of constructive relationships with social control agencies like Police, Probation, or Corrections. Several participants reported to deliberately engaging with such agencies to advance their prospects of sealing employment opportunities. These newly formed connections not only

provided strategic advantages for participants' own career development but also validated their credibility and transformation in the eyes of broader community.

This purposeful engagement with social control agencies was clearly articulated in Taki's narrative, who after deciding *"to do the right thing,"* he deliberately sought to improve his *"relationship with the Police whilst in jail."* He explained that this helped to demonstrate the authenticity of his transformation when he applied for employment because he *"didn't want to just turn up to [a job interview] and say to the employer: Hi, I have changed. And they'd just go: You are full of shit!"*

In other instances, relationships with social control agencies were established as part of employment requirements. Although these relationships appeared to be formed for less strategic purposes, they also served to expand participants' social networks and help achieve desired goals. This was evident in Rawiri's case, who over time, *"formed some relationships with Probation and MSD [Ministry of Social Development] kaimahi"* and as a result he built *"a pretty good name out there amongst some of these and other organisations."*

In Tāmati's instance, because of his long history of incarceration he was familiar with the *"superintendent for the prison,"* who attended a funeral he was facilitating. Although the superintendent *"couldn't believe that it was [him] doing the funeral,"* by witnessing Tāmati's genuine change he decided to support his *"application as a prison ministry volunteer."* Consequently, these newly formed connections were valuable resources for advancing participants' own professional opportunities and personal development.

Whether formed through intentional efforts to demonstrate self-transformation or through workplace obligations, the relationships with social control agencies became key sources that participants drew on to pursue conventional goals. Whilst other participants perceived that their reintegration efforts were being supported by other community groups, such as employers, volunteer placements, education providers, and community-based groups.

Other Prosocial Arenas (Employment, Volunteering, and Education)

Once participants began to work, volunteer, or study realised that the stigma was greater in anticipation than what they actually experienced. The perception of validation within these conventional environments gradually reformed participants' views of themselves and their position in society.

In the theme of Disillusionment in the Gang Life (Chapter Six, p. 165), Toko's reflections signalled that it was the monotony of gang life that spurred him to seek out an alternative path. Despite initial hesitation, Toko eventually overcame his apprehensions. As outlined in his account, the reason he kept returning to the congregation because he felt he was *"surrounded by a different kind of aroha, love"* and the members *"just accepted"* him. However, it was *"the arch deacon's encouragement to come back and learn the scriptures and the readings,"* and the added responsibilities such as *"reading one of the readings to the congregation"* that sealed Toko's commitment to the church.

In Pene's case, his mother's invitation to assist her with writing (pp. 201-202) brought him into contact with the academic social arena, which eventually redirected his gradual regression into the criminal gang lifestyle. Much like in Toko's case, it was the recognition of Pene's potential capabilities by a key member of the educational course that persuaded him to enrol in formal training and become an accredited counsellor:

In the end, I went from me taking the notes, to asking questions, and answering questions. And then, the tutor asked me: Man, you might as well sign up. I mean, you are doing all your mum's work, she is sitting there pretty, while you are answering all the questions. I said: Oh yeah, OK then. So I signed up.

Iwi's and Taki's narratives highlight that setting clear goals and demonstrating perseverance and aspiration to accomplish those, while adhering to socially accepted norms and values, could eventually produce positive outcomes. Iwi's recollection portrays the initial hurdles of securing conventional goals, yet also confirms how motivation to reach such goals and demonstration of genuine change can transpire into a sense of inclusion and reintegration:

It was hard for me trying to get a job in helping youth, but I just kept doing volunteer work. Like the agency was having youth programmes and I would go down and help out. It took them awhile to let me in, because of who I was, because of my gang and criminal record. But after a while, they were like: OK, I will give you a trial run. Obviously, as their business was at risk, I wasn't allowed in where people could see me, I was in the back kitchen, in the background. But I was trying to do as much as I could so they could see I am actually real. Because they trusted me, I wanted to do a good job I didn't want to shit on their names … The agency is like awesome; they always have been. Been with them for a few years now.

Similarly, Taki's reflections illustrate how, after years of being *"tried and tested"* (see p. 196 for further discussion of his initial desistance struggles) for valid reasons, his tenacity and resilience eventually earned him recognition and acceptance in his wider community:

They don't see me fucking burning around all hours on motorbikes, cars, fried off my nut, threatening people, beating people up on the street and all that sort of shit anymore. They see consistency, I get home, I stay home, once I had my training I am going home to my wife and kids and don't go anywhere for no-one. I have been away from them for too long … So, as time's progressed and they had seen me running around with a pram with my grandson pushing him

up the hill sweating on hot days then I see the looks. Now every car waves out to me and they'd stop, and they would talk to me.

Continued commitment to desistance brought about validation from prosocial networks, which in turn reinforced participants' motivation to stay on conventional paths. As their involvement in the new social settings increased, the importance of their conventional role grew. This illuminates progression on participants' reintegration journey. However, prior to addressing how these external stimuli shaped participants' internal transformation, it is important to note that the former gang associates' recognition was also seen as a pivotal factor in consolidating commitment to a prosocial role.

Former Associates

In Chapter Six, the theme of the Immediate Aftermath of Gang Exit (pp. 183-190) revealed that leaving the gang was often a traumatising experience. Many former gang associates severed ties with participants as a way of expressing their resentment over participants' decision to leave or refuse to partake in criminal activities. However, as participants began to accomplish goals and successfully assumed roles in the social and faith-based sector, they began to attract their former associates' attention.

This recognition, to a certain extent, alleviated participants like Roa's emotional burden of desistance. As his former associates reached out to him directly, asking: *"Hey look would you talk with my son? Or would you talk with my granddaughter, or niece?"*; these requests spread word of mouth, generating his reputation as a helper for gang members.

Taki offered a more detailed account of how, after disengaging from the gang with his leader's approval, he had to actively rebuild trust and regain the confidence of his former associates who viewed him with suspicion:

I bring them [Police] around it makes them [active gang members] go like: What the fuck you are bringing pigs around here? Because I need to bring them around here because this is the mahi we are doing … But I have got a few fellas out now on parole and one of them lives at the president's house which has never ever happened before in history. Another gang member on parole on a bracelet because of our support. This makes the sceptics go: Fuck we thought you. Because they thought I was all shit and they just thought I was doing this, actually I don't even know what they thought. But yeh, I have changed a lot of different gang members' perceptions on things.

Participants' assumption of religious roles similarly attracted interest from their former gang peers. For instance, in Tāmati's case, his former gang president would ring him for a prayer when *"he is a bit sick"* or ask him *"to do the funeral"* for the gang. Kaha's reflection echoes Tamati's account, as he noted:

Even, he [the president] is asking me now and then: Can you pray for me, bro? Just shit going on in my life, and I just need someone to pray for me, bro. And I know you believe in that God fella; a prayer would really help. I pray for him. Right on the phone, I would ring him.

The successful assumption of roles in the social and religious sectors drew the attention of former associates. Participants were sought out for their expertise in delivering social or faith-based services. This helped to relieve lingering resentment associated with gang exit.

In conclusion, this theme highlighted that persistently maintaining prosocial roles elicited recognition and validation not only from prosocial groups but also from former criminal gang associates. External validation of transformation typically inspired participants to engage in additional responsibilities related to their conventional roles. This anchored their

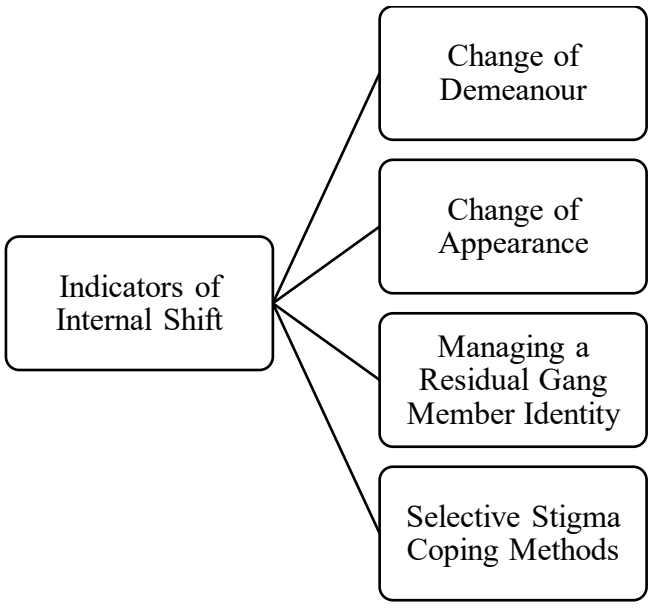
position in their wider social networks, reducing the desire for gang re-entry. These assimilation efforts also directed participants' attention toward their personal appearance and conduct. The next theme, and its subthemes, examines how participants cued internal transformation and the strategies they used to precipitate integration into conventional environments.

Indicators of Internal Shift

While the previous category detailed external factors that supported participants' gang desistance, this category focuses on their internal efforts to integrate into conventional society. To aid this process, participants conducted visible transformation in their presentation and behaviour. The subthemes listed under Figure 7. 5, such as change of demeanour, more specifically refined speech and behaviour, and changes in physical appearance bring attention to these personal developments. The subsequent subthemes discuss how participants attended to the occasional resurgence of impulsive and conflict-driven behaviours (traits associated with their former self) through the application of selective stigma coping method.

Figure 7. 5

Expression of Internal Transition



Change of Demeanour

Personal transformation was displayed in refined demeanour. Participants made deliberate efforts to conform to conventional roles' expectations by eliminating offensive language, refraining from gang-related gestures, and abstaining from criminal activities.

Toatoa's narrative clearly illuminates this process, because after assuming a clerical role, he purposefully *"moved away from swearing as much as [he] used to."* This signals that his behavioural changes were largely shaped by his commitment to fulfilling the expectations associated with being a cleric. Roa's story further elaborates on adjusting demeanour to align with the demands of prosocial roles:

I remember it was on a Sunday, I walked home to my mum, I sat down and we were playing a game with dice, and she looked at me she is stroking her face and said: Son have you given your heart to the lord? And my mum is not a Christian or anything, but she knows about love and I said: What makes you say that? She says: Son, you sit here for quarter of an hour and you haven't sworn once. Something has happened… and that's how she knew.

The narratives of Ānaru and Manu, though differing in context and nature, reveal how ingrained gang-related behaviours were progressively discarded following disengagement. While Ānaru described his resolution to stop using gang hand signs, Manu framed his decision to refrain from engaging in criminal activities as key indicators of abandoning gang identities. Together, these accounts reflect a process of relearning, wherein behaviours and practices acquired during prolonged active gang involvement were consciously replaced with new forms of conduct conducive to assimilation into the conventional society:

So I got to a point where, I started to feel more comfortable not using gang signs, gang slogans, gang colours, and yeah. It took some time; it actually took some practice because the same way it took practice to do the gang signs. (Ānaru)

You know, at the drop of a hat I'd steal, I'd stand over people and take stuff off them because they had what I didn't, and all that thinking all that type of behaviour had to change. (Manu)

To demonstrate adherence to conventional role, participants' consciously distanced themselves from behaviours typically linked to criminal gang membership like the use of gang signs, offensive language, engagement in violent and dishonest activities. Beyond behavioural adjustments, modification of appearance also signalled internal transformation and increasing commitment to new roles.

Change of Appearance

Change of appearance also reflected personal transformation. These alterations manifested in discarding gang attire, and other conspicuous paraphernalia. As presented in Tāmati's reflection when he formally joined his church, he transitioned from *"wearing a gang patch to cutting off all [his] dreads and wearing a suit."*

Participants like Pene and Ānaru, who soon after leaving the gang *"had a whole wardrobeful of [gang colour redacted] clothing,"* began *"getting different clothes"* (Pene) because they deliberately chose to wear "*safe colours, like browns, and whites, pinks, and cross colours"* (Ānaru). This decision was prompted by two main reasons: First, to advance social standing. Second, to avoid potential victimisation or harassment from rival gang members or former associates. Therefore, as Ānaru noted the question: "*What am I wearing today?"* remained a daily concern in navigating post-gang life.

Building on these examples, Hamiora's story advances this theme's concept as it explicitly illustrates how shifts in self-perception influenced changes in appearance, where clothing, in turn served to cue identity transformation:

When I started working at [non-government agency] I was still very unprofessional, because I was wearing my patch to work, because I thought that's what they want. They want the gang member to come in and engage with the gang members. So it took me a little bit to stop that.

Participants with highly visible and indelible gang affiliated branding, such as facial gang tattoos, also made attempts to integrate into conventional society. Typically, their methods included the removal or concealment of these permanent labels. As demonstrated in Mehaka's narrative, while he was in the gang he was oblivious and disinterested in the conventional norms, but after leaving the gang life, he noticed how much his gang-related facial tattoos hindered his *"reconnection with the community."* Hence, to alleviate social exclusion he decided to *"colour the tattoos in."*

Furthermore, Tane's account illustrates his motivation to address his conspicuous markers of former gang affiliation to prove and gain recognition for authentic transformation.

Obviously, [facial tattoos] followed me coming out of the gang, because I still had the tattoos and definitely made me feel like I was a sort of an outcast boy, like I didn't fit in anywhere ... So, I had a lot of laser treatment for the last year and a half, so it's sort of faded a bit.

Personal transformation and commitment to conventional roles was reflected in altered appearance. While some participants deliberately avoided wearing clothing with gang colours and insignia, others undertook measures like removal or concealment of enduring and

conspicuous markers of former gang affiliation. These modifications indicated participants' clear intention to accelerate assimilation into broader conventional social systems. Another compelling sign of internal shift was the conscious regulation of previously dominant reactive problem management style, which was often linked to the vestiges of gang member identity.

Managing a Residual Gang Member Identity

Even years after exiting the gang, participants reported that certain traits, like conflict-driven responses, occasionally resurfaced, reminding them of dominant behaviour patterns from their previous lifestyle. To sustain position in the conventional social networks, participants made deliberate efforts to manage these impulsive tendencies. The necessity of controlling lingering violent coping strategies is compellingly presented in Ānaru's narrative. He explained his approach was to be *"always trying to be nice to everyone in any circumstance [which] prevented [him] from being the other guy, the Hulk."* His comparison of his former self to a cartoon character known for explosive destruction reveals the extent of his awareness of risks his past identity continued to pose. His reflection also highlights how the control of his reactive behaviour was central to his stigma management, a subject explored in the next theme.

Kaha also referenced the contradictions between his former self-identity, which was quick to seek revenge and his religious identity grounded in forgiveness. As outlined in his quote, Kaha's coping strategy mainly drew on the following biblical teachings:

The challenge for me was to overcome the mindset of still being the gangster. I still had that persona even though I walked out. I was like: Oh yeh, if he messes with you, G, go and get him. But brother, what will Jesus do?

As personal priorities shifted, participants became increasingly attentive to the far-reaching consequences of impulsive behaviours. This heightened awareness functioned as a

deterrent, reducing the likelihood of reengagement in criminal or violent acts. Heta for example, used self-reminders to manage his anger when *"some guys came in quite disrespectful"* to the self-help group he was facilitating.

Like Heta, Iwi deliberately refrained from actions that could jeopardise his hard work to attain his social position. He recounted that after exiting he had *"to drop many things to become normal."* For example, as he became more invested in his *"kids and family,"* he started to think: *"I just walk away from fights because they aren't at the top of my priority list anymore."* Iwi further added he knew he *"could go to jail for a number of years again, just for one little thing… and wouldn't be able to do all of these things,"* referring to what he has achieved since he began desisting from criminal gang involvement.

Taki also described managing his impulsivity through self-monitoring that reminded him of the expectations tied to his new role and the potential personal and social cost of reverting to violence in conflict situations:

Driving just down the road because we were former gang members, people know us, other gangs go passed and they look at us with the wrong look we are like: Look at them. But because we are in [helping sector agency] clothes, our jobs are on the line. We sort of gotta grow up, and we snap each other out because it can turn into an instant jail sentence.

Participants' narratives clearly indicated that managing the intermittently resurfacing reactive conflict resolution style, became the primary concern in protecting their newly accomplished social status and position. To regulate these impulsive responses, participants employed a range of strategies including the avoidance of confronting situations, self-monitoring, and the engagement in constant self-reminders about the potential adverse consequences of violent interactions. Despite improved perceptions of social recognition,

participants' ongoing concern with managing aspects of their impulsive former selves rendered their stigma coping methods selective.

Selective Stigma Coping Methods

Although the recognition by conventional social groups consistently encouraged some participants to candidly share their stories (a subject discussed further in the Proactive Stigma Coping Methods theme, pp. 229-231), others remained cautious, opting to selectively release personal information. This latter method shielded participants from potential labelling, thereby preventing the reactivation of impulsive traits associated with their former gang identity.

As noted in the previous theme, Ānaru remained cautious about overtly discussing his gang past because he was *"mindful that, there are many ears at work"* and that any potential prejudice could provoke the reemergence of his former reactive self, metaphorically described as *"Hulk."* For similar reasons, in his work environment, Whiunui disclosed his past only to "*those who needed to know."*

Ihaka elaborated on similar experiences and in his story, the shift from using reactive to selective disclosure was vividly demonstrated. After exiting the gang and relocating to a different region, Ihaka secured employment with a social service agency, where initially, he remained secretive about his gang background due to concerns about potentially being judged. As his professional relationships deepened, Ihaka discovered that some colleagues shared similar life experiences, prompting him to be less defensive about his past:

It took me about six months to tell [colleague's name redacted] pretty much everything ... And that [disclosing former gang affiliation] wasn't to everyone, that was only because I felt like me and [colleague], sort of just hit it off straight away. And [colleague] used to say things to me like: There is more to you than what you are just bringing here.

The recognition that social stigma was more pronounced in anticipation than in actual enactment encouraged participants to employ less reactive stigma management strategies. Although some remained cautious, the adoption of selective disclosure approach enabled them to gauge their colleagues' attitudes and reactions to gangs, ensuring that personal information was shared only with those whom they had come to trust. In this context, building trust served to soften the impact of potential stigma and to ensure that disclosure occurred in a supportive environment. This method played an instrumental role in expanding social connections.

This category's objective was to highlight how reconnection with various prosocial institutions spurred participants' interest in establishing further connections in social settings like extended family members, social control agencies, other prosocial communities, and even former associates. The desire for deeper assimilation brought on internal shifts aligned with the expectations of conventional roles. This personal transformation was expressed through adjusted demeanour and appearance as well as in a keen attention and increased effort to control any resurgence of aggression, associated with their former selves. To manage a residual gang identity and avoid risking losing hard-earnt social status, some participants remained cautious and employed a selective strategy when it came to disclosing their former criminal gang involvement. While these participants only shared personal information with whom they trusted, others became less concerned about the possibility of encountering social stigma. The following category presents how participants' open disclosure of their former selves reflected a broader level of reintegration and signalled the consolidation of a desister identity.

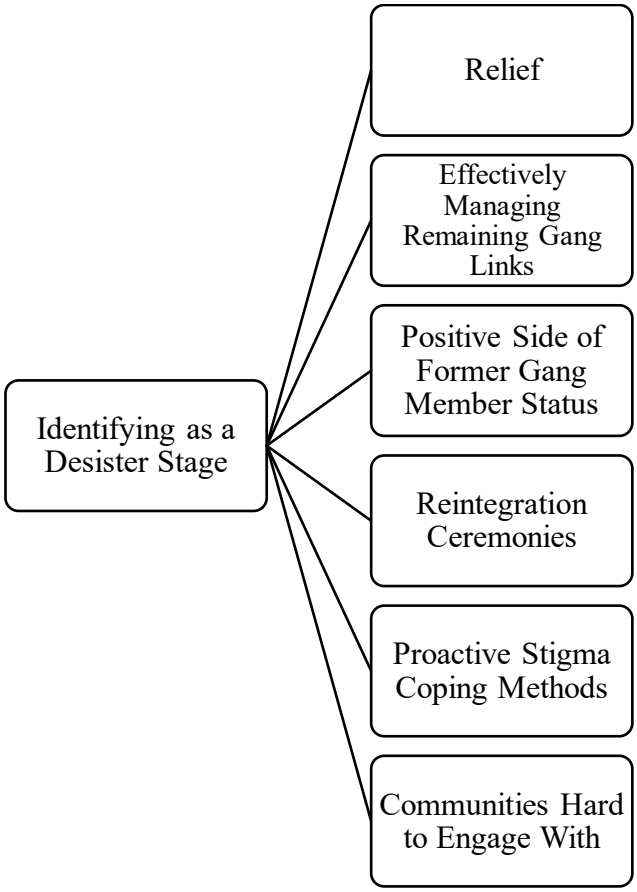
Identifying as a Desister Stage

At the time of interviewing, approximately one third of the participants reported being less cautious about publicly identifying as a former gang member. The themes displayed in Figure 7. 6, such as sense of relief from desistance stressors and ability to openly and effectively

manage lingering ties with former associates without fear of being targeted or misidentified as active criminal gang affiliate are structured to illustrate participants' advanced gang desistance. Subsequent themes, including the recognition of the positives side of former criminal gang member status, engagement in reintegration ceremonies, proactive stigma coping strategies, and understanding why certain communities continue to remain hard to engage with further indicate participants' progression along the gang desistance continuum.

Figure 7. 6

The Adoption of a Desister Identity



Relief

The relief from being targeted or labelled as a former criminal gang member was indicative of advanced assimilation into broader conventional society. The liberation from the lingering burden of past identities reduced concern over needing to constantly prove authenticity of transformation.

Both Pene and Tāmati shared similar sentiments about the relief of desistance. By abandoning behaviours and symbolic markers associated with their past identities, Pene did not feel that he *"had to watch over [his] shoulder"* and Tāmati *"as compared to before… didn't need to worry about getting jumped"* when they were out in public or travelled to a different town. While Taki's reflection points out that during his transformation process, his self-acceptance increased making it *"easier to see what [he] can do as a human being."*

These reflections support the point, that how participants' regarded themselves and consequently, behaved was shaped by how they saw themselves in the eyes of others. Therefore, acceptance and integration into conventional society brought a sense of relief from the residual strains of gang exit. This perception of successful integration enabled participants to be less concerned about social stigma impacts and overtly manage lingering ties with former associates.

Effectively Managing Remaining Gang Links

Repairing relationships with former associates required effective management. By maintaining clear social boundaries while overtly acknowledging these links, participants signalled their enhanced self-perception as transformed individuals. In turn, gang communities validated their transformation efforts by accepting and affirming their desister status.

For example, Ihaka previously shared (p. 133) that his uncles, who had introduced him to the lifestyle, initially resented his decision to leave the gang[53]. However, by demonstrating competence in accomplishing conventional goals he earnt respect within his gang whānau:

So, I was born and raised in [New Zealand city]. So every time we go there, there is a natural calling to call into all the textbook places like my uncle's house and then go to his son's house. (Ihaka)

Are they still living the same lifestyle? (Interviewer)

Yeah, they are living the same, but it's beautiful because I go in the person and they are like: Look at you, bro, Kaumātua. (Ihaka)

Afa's narrative also indicated that long-established emotional ties were difficult to sever. Deep connections with fellow members built over an extended period of association, motivated reconciliation. As he stated:

We get on well now, they talk with me. They know where I am at the moment, and they don't mock me or pressure me. We are good old friends. That's not going to change, if they do a motor bike ride, I support it.

Long-standing emotional ties, along with validation from former associates, often encouraged reconciliation. Participants who retained or rekindled connections with their respective gangs, while clearly signalling a commitment to conventional roles, did not hide

[53]Further information about Ihaka's gang exit is provided in Chapter Six (p. 187).

their links to former associates. This lack of concern about potential public scrutiny reflected increased confidence in managing gang connections and indicated an enhanced desister identity. Moreover, these renewed or retained connections were, at times, reframed as *"a skill, another asset"* (Ihaka), that participants could draw upon in their conventional roles.

Positives Side of Former Gang Member Status

With the demonstration of authentic transformation and the establishment of a secure social standing, the positive side of former gang identity became more visual. Instead of concealing their lived experiences and lingering connections, participants strategically utilised the vestiges of their former lifestyle to advance their social and professional positions.

At this advanced stage of the desistance continuum, participants, like Ihaka, began to frame their former gang member status "*as an advantage"*. For example, Tāmati found that drawing on his past life experiences in his faith-based role offered *"valuable input"* and deeper insights into the lives of the underprivileged and stigmatised. His compassionate approach led to his appointment as *"an executive board member for the whole organisation."*

Pene offers an extended reflection on how lived experiences can be capitalised on to facilitate advancement in social or faith-based sector roles:

It's been good, our people [colleagues] will seek out my opinion or sit down and inquire about what I think about what the experience with either their clients or people that related to their clients, and things like that. I get a whole lot of different engagement from, say, the little Irish lady who works around here. You know what I mean, but that's a given eh, obviously, she looks different, sounds different, and has different ideas. And I look, talk, walk, and act like the people that walk in here every day … Through my travels, I've met so many people from different clubs, so I can throw a line out there to see if something hits. It's quite cool, some people realise: So you are the fella that they are talking about?

Wider public recognition emerged from tireless efforts in navigating and guiding gang communities towards a more conventional and faith-oriented lifestyle. As Toatoa's narrative suggests that the strategic use of his lived experience in his religious role earned him public recognition and reputation. So when he travels around the country to facilitate church service *"nearly everybody knows him because they had seen [him] on [different media outlets]."* As his public profile *"is getting bigger and bigger,"* his commitment to religious and mentoring role is simultaneously reinforced.

Participants with stable social positions reported drawing on their lived experiences and renewed or retained gang connections in their helping or faith-based sector roles. These former lifestyle elements functioned as assets, aiding the progression of participants' social standing. As participants recognised the value of former criminal gang involvement, they moved away from secrecy or selective disclosure and instead publicly disclosed their former affiliations. Like Toatoa, other participants also engaged in public presentations that demonstrated their personal transformation and affirmed their authentic transformation.

Reintegration Ceremonies

Prior to engaging in this study's interviews, several participants had already taken part in reintegration ceremonies, a term referring to public or media appearances through which they shared their personal transformation stories and received broader social validations of authentic change. Participants regarded these public presentations as symbolic ceremonies where their transformation from a criminal gang member to social or faith-based role holder was formally recognised.

For example, Tāmati alongside other reformed gang members was invited to *"facilitate to the Police and other agencies about the gangs."* During this presentation *"social workers were picking [their] brain,"* showing a strong interest, which allowed Tāmati and his colleagues "*to talk about where [they]'d come from and what influenced [them] to go into*

gangs." This presentation, therefore, offered Tāmati and his colleagues an opportunity to educate their audience about the social and structural factors that drive gang involvement. In addition, by showcasing his own experience, Tāmati was able to challenge stereotypes about reformed gang members and demonstrate the feasibility of transformation.

Manu's and Piripi's excerpts also illustrate how public presentations before distinguished community members functioned both as declaration of authentic transformation and validation of occupational competencies.

I recently spoke at a conference at the Police College about my changes, while it was challenging, I was able to go in there, as you know, I am in my third year of my social work degree, and it was great to get a positive response. (Manu)

[A university lecturer] got us all to talk to university students. Yeah, so we talked with a whole lot of psychiatry students, law students, that sort of thing to give them another perspective. They were like: Oh these guys are actually really nice guys. (Piripi)

Public appearances were typically undertaken by participants who had already achieved a degree of social stability and perceived support within their broader social networks. Recognition and certification of transformation by larger institutional systems further augmented participants' gang desistance efforts, affirming the legitimacy of their personal reformation and the practical value of their lived experiences. As explored in the following theme, these public presentations and disclosures indicated a significant shift in how participants approached the management of anticipated or enacted stigma.

Proactive Stigma Coping Methods

As outlined earlier in the Integration Stage category (pp. 206-222), community group members' recognition, such as social control agencies, extended family members, and other prosocial communities, boosted confidence and motivated participants to adopt proactive stigma coping methods. While the primary purpose of public disclosures was to gain validation for authentic reform in a broader social arena, these practices also functioned to openly challenge conventional misperceptions and dismantle stereotypes associated with former criminal gang members. Through pre-emptive disclosure, participants were able to control the flow of information, especially in communities, that remained resistant to accept their change.

As previously implied, in the earlier stages of desistance, Pene tended to rely on defensive[54] methods when responded to perceived stigma. As his validation increased, his concerns about the potential consequences of overtly disclosing his former gang affiliation diminished. Hence, he is now "*a firm believer: Take me as I am or not at all,"* recognising that this approach often *"helped [him] to connect with and reach out to people when [he] goes out as a professional."*

Building on the previous themes of Reactive (pp. 204-206) and Selective Stigma Coping Strategies (pp. 221-222), Ihaka's narrative reflects a clear progression towards adopting proactive stigma management styles. As he became acculturated into his conventional role and gained greater external support, Ihaka's confidence in publicly announcing his former lifestyle steadily increased. The way in which his growing self-esteem prompted proclamation of past gang affiliation is illustrated in his reflection:

At our office, everyone got a chance to stand up and have a five-to-10-minute spill on who they are, where they come from. And I told everybody everything and everyone was like: Holy shit.

[54]Pene's initial response to stigma is presented in the Reactive Stigma Coping theme (p. 205).

That was my first time I ever said it openly like that, I think that comes down to me how comfortable I am getting in my own skin now, knowing that actually that person [gang member identity] is a part of making me who I am.

From the perspective of pre-emptive strategy, Ihaka's approach enabled him to control the flow of information and prevent accusations of concealing past involvement in socially objectionable behaviours. A similar sentiment is reflected in Piri's narrative. As a long-standing honorary gang affiliate well-known in his community, Piri explained that his name often "*preceded"* him in his role as an event or programme facilitator. Although his own community regarded him as an ordinary citizen, members of other communities treated him with more caution. In this quote, Piri illustrates how he employed pre-emptive strategies to diffuse tension and ease others' reservations:

I don't flaunt about it, or act like a gang member. I just act like myself, how I normally am. If I am running an event, I just go over and welcome anybody even if the guys are from other gangs, just shake their hands and have a talk with them, make them feel welcome. Just how I operate. But sometimes, they'd stand aside and sort of just stand back, and I just go over there and acknowledge them straight away it freezes their minds up.

As participants' confidence increased, the use of proactive stigma management strategies became more prevalent. By addressing prejudice directly, participants had greater control over personal information flow and challenge prevailing misconception about transformed criminal gang members. However, overt disclosure of honorary or former gang affiliations was not always met with acceptance. Participants' narratives suggested that, despite

demonstrating authentic transformation and successfully integrating into wider communities, certain segments continued to judge and criticise their past identities.

Communities Hard to Engage With

Almost all participants, regardless of their position on the gang desistance continuum, reported ongoing experiences of stigma generated in communities they found hard to engage with. Although participants were able to form meaningful and constructive relationships in their broader social systems, they identified specific groups such as the wealthy, some members of social control agencies, and other qualified professionals as persistently treating them as though they were still actively engaging in criminal gang activities.

Indeed, when asked during the interview about their experiences of ongoing stigma, both Iwi and Ruka described facing enduring judgement and stereotypical treatment within their larger conventional society. However, rather than listing agencies and communities that had actively discriminated against them, Iwi and Ruka offered a thoughtful explanation of the factors that might contribute to the misconceptions about reformed criminal gang members:

I think people who haven't been around, seen, or experienced, people who are in that position whether they are in jail, in the gang, or getting into trouble, haven't had an insight into it. Yeah, they don't know, because in all their life they had a different experience. I would say, people wouldn't understand if they haven't been around people like me or in these situations. (Iwi)

I suppose I gotta take a step back and see what an ordinary person thinks. I lived this life I'd seen it every day, but a person outside probably doesn't see it, all they see is a whole lot of patch members, and they read what's on the news and that's where they get their ideas from. They are not going to be a part of everyday lives [of gang members]; they might meet one once or somebody with gang connections, so that's how they're making their observation. (Ruka)

Notwithstanding the similarities in Iwi's and Ruka's responses, Iwi attributed ongoing stigmatisation to the fundamental social divide between conventional and gang communities, while Ruka credited the extensive sensationalised media portrayals of gang activity as a key contributing factor. Yet both narratives, echoed by other participants, suggested that residual stigma surrounding former criminal gang membership status persisted long after gang exit largely because members of conventional communities had limited understanding of gang desistance process and often failed to recognise ex-criminal gang members' transformation efforts. Their reflections raise a set of critical questions: can the experience of enacted social stigma be fully alleviated and can a desisting criminal gang member truly accomplish a desister identity in the eyes of society at large in its fullest and most inclusive sense? Or does authentic transformation require ongoing reaffirmation?

This category explored how former gang members adopt a desister identity. The attainment of an advanced desisted status was evidenced by themes outlining that participants' sense of relief was realised as a result of cessation of gang exit stresses and effective management of social ties with former associates. Themes, like the recognition of positive side of former gang status, which in turn motivated participants to overtly disclose past characteristics and engage in public speaking, also signalled the adoption of a desister identity.

Moreover, the proactive management of anticipated and enacted social stigma coupled with an insight into why certain social groups continue to stigmatise transformed criminal gang members demonstrated participants' enhanced position on the criminal gang desistance continuum. However, the persistence of systemic social stigma in the larger conventional social web raises a compelling question: can the certification of authentic reformation ever be fully realised in the eyes of society at large?

Conclusion

The implication of gang disengagement extended into the early phases of gang desistance maintenance. Initial challenges such as difficulty securing employment created financial hardships and self-doubts regarding the ability to achieve realistic goals. These societal pressures, at times, propelled participants to actively seep back into criminal activities for financial gain. However, this study found that this regression was mitigated by various push factors, including significant others' ongoing and unconditional support and former associates' discouragement. Besides these protective influences, the establishment of conventional goals abated ambivalence and reinforced commitment to desistance. During the early stage, participants typically employed reactive strategies, like they avoided social contact and chose to conceal their former criminal gang affiliation in social settings in order to prevent scrutiny and judgement. These strategies helped gain access to desired roles, playing an instrumental role in advancing participants on the gang desistance continuum.

Commitment to desistance improved as participants formed new relationships or reconnected with various prosocial groups. Reconciliation with extended family members, renewed ties with selected former associates, and building relationships with social control agencies fostered optimism about their standing in conventional society. It was also evident in this study, that acceptance in broader prosocial groups encouraged participants to utilise proactive integration efforts to conform to the expectations of social and faith-based roles and preserve their hard-earnt social position. This was demonstrated in modified conduct and appearance, and careful attention to regulate behaviours regarded as the residue of former gang affiliation. The acute awareness of the necessity to control impulsive behaviour contributed to the adoption of selective stigma management styles.

Finally, the analysis revealed that only those who experienced sustained acceptance became less concerned about the prevailing social stigma in their broader social networks.

Participants' ability to establish clear boundaries and maintain healthy social ties with former associates, leverage lived experiences in professional roles and publicly discuss past identities as part of a proactive stigma management style signalled a more advanced stage of desister identification. However, public disclosure of former gang involvement drew negative attention from certain segments of society. The persistence of systemic stigma reflects a limited societal understanding of reformed criminal gang members' constantly evolving and dynamic process of transformation. This raises an important question: can former criminal gang members ever be fully deidentified from their past role in the eyes of society at large?

Conclusion of the Findings Chapters

In these findings chapters, key turning points in participants' life trajectories were identified through the interpretive phenomenological analysis. Although these critical events were embedded within distinct individual processes, they became most visible at three pivotal moments namely the adoption of gang member identity, criminal gang exit, and maintenance of gang desistance. The findings emphasised that this change was neither immediate nor unilateral, but rather, the outcome of a series of interconnected events that began in participants' formative years. Indeed, adoption of a gang member identity was not a spontaneous decision, it evolved from cumulative experiences of childhood adversities such as parental maltreatment, non-intact family structures, perceived rejection by caregivers and peers, and the influence of gang affiliated family members. Additionally, spatial risk factors, particularly the geographical proximity to gangs in neighbourhoods, schools, and prisons increased participants' desire for belonging, obtaining social status, and protection.

These factors contributed to viewing gangs as institutions that offered a sense of refuge from marginalisation, fulfilling unmet social and emotional needs, while simultaneously promoting and normalising delinquent behaviours for status and financial gain. This

glorification drove participants to immerse into the gang life, which led to both the internalisation of gang norms and values and further detachment from conventional social groups. Modified conduct, appearance, conflict resolution style, and anticipated life-long membership marked participants' growing identification with the gang member role.

However, this deep gang embeddedness was disrupted by a range of experiences including disillusionment with and conflicts with gang dynamics, prolonged or repeated imprisonment, participation in prison-based programmes, and changes in family and health circumstances. While these events prompted reflection about continued gang membership and oscillation between the conventional and gang worlds, they did not immediately pull participants' out of the grip of the gang. Instead, the accumulation of negative experiences associated with the gang life culminated in critical life events such as fatherhood, spiritual awakening, and relocation. Though these key events too were rooted in and extended from participants' earlier discontents, they were regarded as catalyst for full disengagement.

Leaving the gang often came at a cost, exposing participants to hostile exit rituals, verbal threats, criticism, and the loss of access to financial and social safety nets. These experiences, at times, caused psychological distress, financial strain, and in some cases, regret and a temporary return to criminal gang activates for gaining profit. Nevertheless, the presence of protective factors such as encouragement from significant others, former associates' dissuasion, and procurement of conventional goals helped alleviate ambivalence about remaining gang free. During the early stages of desistance, participants often employed reactive stigma management methods, including concealment of former gang affiliation and withdrawal from social interactions. As these approaches assisted in shielding participants from public scrutiny and accessing conventional roles, they proved to be critical in advancing desistance.

As embeddedness in prosocial institutions continued, participants' commitment to desistance intensified. Reconciliation with extended family, engagement with social control

agencies, and integration into faith-based or occupational roles supported participants in rebuilding confidence and transforming their identities. This internal reorientation was communicated through modified appearance and behaviour that aligned with societal expectations. Moreover, the use of selective stigma management approaches signalled that participants were less preoccupied about concealing their past yet remained cautious about how it might be perceived. Hence to regulate residual gang behaviours, such as impulsivity, and protect hard-earnt social status disclosed past-self only to those they had come to trust.

A notable shift occurred, when participants began to overtly manage lingering gang links and adopt proactive stigma management strategies. Through public speaking and overt disclosure, they asserted control over the flow of their personal information and challenged stereotypes about transformed gang members. Participants' transparency was reinforced by perceived validation from employers, community members, and audiences, which further strengthened their self-concept as desisters.

Yet, despite demonstrable transformation and sustained engagement in prosocial roles, many participants continued to feel their desistance efforts remained contested by certain segments of conventional society. These ongoing experiences implied that the adoption of desister identity involves more than just leaving the gang and constructing a new self, it also requires the strategic navigation of societal support and scrutiny. The dismissal of participants' visible transformation efforts raises a critical question: can a former criminal gang member ever be fully deidentify from their past and recognised as a desister by the society at large?

In conclusion, participants' accounts illustrated their resilience for transformation in the face of enduring presence of social stigma. While the internal change and desistance are indeed achievable and socially demonstrable, full recognition in the eyes of society at large can be conditional. The persistence of stereotypes meant that reformed criminal gang members remained symbolically anchored to their former identities and continued to experience the

effects of hangover identifications. Thus, desistance should not be seen solely as a personal achievement, but as a social process that requires ongoing validation from the wider community. Without this broader acceptance, desistance is hindered, and individuals may face persistent barriers to full reintegration, despite their genuine efforts. In the following chapter, a discussion is offered linking these critical findings to extant literature and highlighting potential avenues through which former gang members can be better supported in their desistance journeys and experience less harm from lingering stigma and hangover identities.

Chapter Eight

Discussion

This chapter presents a discussion of the study's findings in relation to existing literature, revisits the research objectives and questions, and elaborates on the broader implications of the findings. The comparative analysis of the study's findings with extant literature is organised chronologically, and it follows the three life course phases identified in Chapters Five, Six, and Seven. This time-lined structure while discussing both parallels and contrasts with the existing scholarship, emphasises the chronological significance of the external and internal factors influencing participants' entry into and exit from gangs, and the maintenance of desistance. For ease of reference, please see a comprehensive summary of the key literature utilised in this study offered in Chapter Two (pp. 55-56).

The chapter then turns to the study's objectives and presents the research questions which are: (1) What experiences of stigma do desisting gang members have? (2) How do experiences of stigma impact the development of desisting gang members' emerging former gang member identity development? (3) How do desisting gang members protect their emerging desired identity in the face of adversity? (4) How does the emerging former gang member identity contribute to the changes in the desisting gang member's social networks?

Following their sequential order, the research questions are addressed separately from the literature comparison. This structure allows for a detailed examination of participants' experiences of stigma, identity transformation, stigma management strategies, and social network changes across different life phases, without strictly adhering to a chronological order. As the research highlights the significance of stigma in shaping the desistance process, it argues the importance of tailored interventions to support gang exit and reintegration. This sets the stage for a dialogue about the practical implications of findings, and offers suggestions for

enhancing existing programmes aimed at curbing criminal gang membership rate. Finally, the chapter outlines how the study's theoretical framework may inform future research designs on gang desistance and management of stigma among other marginalised populations.

The Process of Gang Entry

Unsurprisingly, the interpretive phenomenological analysis of participants' life stories revealed that criminal gang desistance is inseparable and intrinsically emerges out of the adoption of a gang member identity. As Ebaugh (1988, p. 170) posits, there are fundamental psychological and sociological differences between former members and non-members, because those who "have never belonged in the role" could not establish "in-group relationships with others in that role" and could not adopt the group's norms, values, and practices. This view is particularly relevant to ANZ criminal gangs, which, like sub-cultures or substitute families possess internal processes that are only logical to members (Tamatea, 2015).

As the findings show, participants' desire to be a part of a criminal gang arose in reaction to conditions within their immediate and wider social contexts. Accordingly, the discussion of the findings begins with the various, yet often coalescing, familial and spatial disadvantages, that contributed to participants acquiring social labels such as delinquent or pariah. This sense of exclusion from prosocial institutions generated an idolised view of the criminal gang, which upon entry, exerted a powerful influence and led participants to identify with it.

Familial Factors

The range of adverse childhood experiences within participants' family structure created feelings of insecurity both at home and amongst their peers. The most frequently identified familial aspect was being raised in a solo parent household. Consistent with the findings of Blum et al. (1988), Comber (1981), Farrington (2005), Fergusson et al. (1994), and Henry et al. (1996) participants assigned their experiences of growing up in a disrupted

household where they felt abandoned by their parents and lacked adequate parental supervision to the development of low self-esteem and early conduct disorder.

Alongside the paucity of consistent parental oversight, participants also considered their parents' harsh physical discipline and unrealistic expectations as contributors to the emergence of their delinquent behaviours. This aligns with the findings of child developmental researchers like Loeber and Farrington (1998), Moffitt (1993), Robins (1979), and Wolfe and Mosk (1983), who confirm that insufficient parental supervision, especially when it is coupled with ongoing harsh discipline and rejective parenting style can cause aversive parental child interactions, that can negatively impact on child's neurological development. Furthermore, Loeber and Farrington (1998), Kempe et al. (1962), and Russell et al. (2015) identify the battered child syndrome as a critical factor for rapid acceleration of impulsivity, emotional dysregulation, and violent tendencies. These behaviour traits can lead to social isolation in prosocial peer groups, which in turn, prompt association with similarly marginalised peers (Farrington, 2005).

Finally, participants articulated how the visible success of gang affiliated family members or caregivers, who portrayed gang involvement as a means of securing financial stability and elevated social status, also shaped their interest in pursuing a criminal gang lifestyle. Studies by Lemert (1951), Lipsey and Derzon (1999), Thornberry, Krohn, et al. (2003), and Thornberry, Lizotte, et al. (2003) offer strong evidence that antisocial tendencies can be transmitted from parents to children, due to the children's susceptibility to internalise family norms. Supporting these research findings, Farrington (2005) further argues that law enforcement agencies' labelling of reputed criminal gang families can cultivate negative attitudes towards authority in their children, therefore, indirectly reinforcing intergenerational patterns of antisocial tendencies.

Several participants ascribed their harmful family experiences during their formative years to the development of low self-esteem, insecurities, and impulsive and delinquent

tendencies. These personal traits and self-perceptions shaped their interactions with prosocial peers. The next session further explains how peer relationships (or the lack of) became key factors in steering participants' life trajectory toward gangs.

Spatial Factors

Findings indicated that participants' wider spatial structures were also instrumental in forming antisocial and delinquent views. Schools and neighbourhoods were considered prominent social environments to generate insecurity and an increased need for self-defence. In turn, involvement in violent interactions and other objectional behaviours produced negative social labels, which restricted participants' access to prosocial networks.

Participants' reflections mirror the outcomes of earlier research highlighting the significant role of school and neighbourhood composition in reinforcing or introducing youth to criminal and delinquent behaviours (Dupéré et al., 2007; Pyrooz, 2012; Shaw & McKay, 1942; Thrasher, 1927). Similarly to these international findings, local researchers like Faleolo (2014) and Breetzke et al. (2021) suggest that disorganised ANZ communities, characterised by poverty, overcrowding, and limited job opportunities create fertile conditions for the formation of delinquent groups (Lemert, 1951; Thornberry et al., 1993; Thrasher, 1927).

Imprisonment was also identified as a spatial risk factor, which besides generating strain between the participants and the conventional society, also seemed to precipitate their gang entry process. Incarceration exposed participants to other inmates' physical and verbal threats, prompting them to join gangs in prison for protection. While prison settings are seldom considered as a spatial risk factor for gang entry, as individuals entering are often already perceived as gang affiliated (Lopez-Aguado, 2018; Pyrooz, 2023), not all inmates are gang members. Recent local government reports by Brown et al. (2023) and Gilbert (2024), and international studies by Pyrooz (2023) and Sorensen et al. (2024) bring attention to the role prison plays in gang entry. As upon entering prison, gangs as social entities not only provide

protection from harassment and violent attacks but also help incarcerated individuals adapt to the deprivation of interpersonal relationships, prestige, and access to material goods in the form of contrabands (Bolden, 2020; Brotherton & Barrios, 2004).

By reflecting on their childhood and teenage experiences, participants were able to clearly articulate how familial and spatial circumstances contributed to the formulation of their low self-esteem, poor self-perception, and delinquent behaviours. The adverse experiences during formative years critically shaped participants' peer connections. By drawing on the extant literature, the following section delves deeper into discussing how these familial and spatial experiences prompted a desire to seek out alternative peer groups.

Need to Belong

Studies concerned with the impacts of stigma repeatedly highlight that alienation from prosocial networks heightens the desire to belong to a substitute peer group (Frost, 2011; Goffman, 1963; LeBel, 2008; Maruna & LeBel, 2010). Unsurprisingly, disconnection from prosocial institutions increased participants' initial attraction to criminal gangs, where social and emotional needs were met and tolerance for delinquency was found.

The extensive findings of social work, psychology, sociology, and convict criminology[55] investigations consistently highlight that poor social skills and developed misconduct are significant contributors to limiting accessibility to prosocial peer groups (De Vito, 2021; Deakin et al., 2022; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Dunbar, 2018; Gilbert, 2013; Honeywell, 2023; Moffitt, 1993; Patterson & Dishion, 1985; Tamatea, 2015; Tremblay, 2003; Tyler, 2018; Young et al., 2014). This perceived social rejection and alienation drive individuals to seek out alternative peer networks to satisfy their need for belonging and acceptance.

[55]The term is explained in the Glossary.

Lifestyle Glorification

Consistent with these findings, participants' narratives repeatedly indicated that prior to joining, they typically glamorised the gang, viewing its lifestyle as such that offered financial security, prestige, and social acceptance of personal traits otherwise condemned in prosocial settings. Actively pursuing gang membership became a means of fulfilling these (typically societal) needs unattainable in their immediate and wider conventional environments. In the gang literature, such idolisation and socialisation into criminal gang culture are explained through the concepts of kind of person approach (Cohen, 1955; Glueck & Glueck, 1940; Hirschi, 1969; Miller, 1958; Spergel, 1990; Thornberry et al., 1993). This perspective posits that delinquent characteristics predispose individuals to gravitate to criminal subcultures. The narratives of participants who reported engagement in serious delinquency prior to joining the gang were consistent with this approach.

However, participants whose misconduct and law violation tendencies were minimal pre-gang entry aligned with what scholars like Elliot et al. (1979), Sarnecki (1990), and Short and Strodtbeck (1965) describe as the kind of group approach. According to this perspective, while some degree of delinquency is necessary to initiate attraction to delinquent peer groups, it is the gang lifestyle that amplifies delinquency. This view is further elaborated in Sutherland and Cressey's (1955) and Sutherland et al.'s (1992) differential association theory, which states that delinquency is not inherently rooted in personal traits but is rather group facilitated through social interactions that normalise and reinforce deviant behaviours among members.

In summary, the most suggestive indicators of potential gang entry were participants' inability to formulate meaningful relationships in prosocial groups and their increased attraction to antisocial and delinquent activities. This disconnection generated their glorification of a community, where socially unattainable needs could be met, and socially

objectionable behaviours were tolerated and encouraged. The following section addresses, how the gang entry can alter one's life course, thus become a turning point.

Entry

The previous themes suggest that gang entry was not an abrupt decision. Instead risk factors prevalent in familial and spatial contexts gradually divorced participants from prosocial institutions and ushered them towards the criminal gang world. Once involved, the gang's social grip readjusted participants' life trajectories by bringing forth identities aligned with expectations of gang membership. This supports Melde and Esbensen's (2011) finding that gang entry, given its influential power can be characterised as a turning point in the life course.

Almost all participants reported a sense of relief from feeling discriminated or judged upon entering the gang. Being understood and accepted enhanced participants' association with members. This again parallels Sutherland and Cressey's (1955) differential association theory positing that recognition and validation within a group increases the frequency of interaction with members, which in turn mediates the transactions of the group's legal codes definitions (or norms and practices). Similarly, Tamatea (2015) highlights that ANZ gangs maintain strict internal norms, with which members promptly familiarise upon entering. While acculturation provides a sense of exclusivity, it considerably restricts members' connections with conventional society (Fleisher & Decker, 2001; Smith & Thornberry, 1995).

Indeed, the effects of gangs' social grip appeared to be detrimental for participants' remaining prosocial ties. Their accounts suggested that gang involvement reinforced violent conflict resolution style and increased criminal capital. This conduct elicited further labels, eroded remaining ties with prosocial family members and knifed off opportunities with prosocial institutions. Feeling rejected and isolated led participants to go deeper with gangs, ultimately accomplishing what Pyrooz et al. (2013) define as criminal gang embeddedness.

Social stigma and total immersion in the gang lifestyle influenced participants' self-reflection which paralleled Lemert's (1951, 1972) secondary deviance theory. Based on Cooley's (1902) looking glass theory, Lemert contends that a delinquent self-concept[56] is constructed through social interactions with significant others. As reflected in participants' narratives, participants' identification as criminal gang members was not only shaped by escalating social labels but also by constant appraisals from other members.

This internal adjustment was also displayed externally. Participants signalled their enhanced identification with the gang through the ubiquitous use of gang paraphernalia like gang branded and coloured clothing, habitual use of gang signs, and gang-related tattoos. Previous research suggests that such behaviours (using hand signals and expressions) and selection of dress and tattoos act as visible confirmation of membership in a reference group (Phelan & Hunt, 1998; Sanders, 1988; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). In this context, gang regalia, particularly facial tattoos, articulated participants' rejection of conventional norms and alienation from mainstream social networks (Sanders, 1988).

Participants' reflections on conspicuous endorsement of social stigma, resonate with the observations of Andrae et al. (2017b), Fleisher and Decker (2001), McNaughton (2007), Phelan and Hunt (1998), and Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1982), who argue that external cues like attire, tattoos, and hairstyles can communicate one's perceived social status. Beyond expressing self-perception and subsequently social status, physical appearance can also reveal one's aspirations and investment in moral careers (Goffman, 1961). Indeed, for participants, both internal and external adjustments reflected a commitment and anticipation of long-term, if not life-long, affiliation with the criminal gang. These reflections, perhaps best illustrate what Moule et al.'s (2013) refer to as the severe effects of a gang's social suction.

[56]The concept of self, along with related terms is discussed in detail in Chapter Three (pp. 61-63).

Participants' anticipation of long-term or life-long criminal gang membership also aligns with the findings of local gang scholars who argue that the socio-economic and demographic commonalities shared between ANZ's socially disorganised neighbourhoods and gang communities (which also include complex familial connections) facilitate smoother gang integration into gangs and support long-term membership (Brown et al., 2023; Gilbert, 2010, 2013; Taonui & Newbold, 2013). Expanding on this, Tamatea (2015, 2017) posits that life-long or intergenerational gang affiliation is the outcome of compounding stigmas of ethnic origin, low socioeconomic, and ex-convict background in ANZ's social structure. These intersective stigmas, thus, explain how marginalisation increases the inclination to seek refuge, identity, and recognition in gangs.

Conclusion

Participants' reflections on childhood familial and spatial circumstances illuminated formative experiences that played an important role in developing socially condemned personal characteristics. These traits reduced their social fitness in the eyes of prosocial family and peers. Limited access to prosocial groups fostered participants' desire to belong in an alternative band. The gang's portrayal as a source of protection, as well as social and emotional validation for delinquent behaviours, fuelled participants' glamorisation of the criminal gang lifestyle.

Upon gang entry, the gang's social suction further eroded participants' remaining prosocial connections, reinforced impulsive conflict resolution style, and altered their self-perception and appearance to signal deepening embeddedness in the criminal gang world. Although, gang embeddedness was reflected in the anticipation of long-term or life-long gang involvement, changes in participants' personal lives gradually altered their perception of the benefits associated with the criminal gang lifestyle. In line with existing studies, the following section discusses the factors that weakened participants' ties to criminal gang and marked the onset of transformative change.

The Process of Gang Exit

The study's findings on the exit from the criminal gang-centred life largely follow the theoretical perspectives of Ebaugh's (1998) role exit and Giordano et al.'s (2002) cognitive transformation. Considering these theoretical approaches along with literature more specific on gang disengagement, this section discusses how disillusionment with the role of criminal gang member, which was typically combined with shifts in participants' personal circumstances marked the initial step of the exit process. The section also addresses subsequent junctures such as participants' open experimentation with alternative roles or oscillation between gang and conventional worlds, as well as the occurrence of critical moments that crystallised the need for change and abruptly ended the exit process, manifesting in an event with diverse immediate consequences.

First Doubts and Oscillation

Participants' experiences of certain events appeared to spark what Ebaugh (1988) refers to as initial doubts, serving as the earliest signals of a changing attitude toward gang affiliation. Although often coalescing, the sources of uncertainty about continued dedication to the criminal gang member role can be broadly categorised in two major groups: disillusionment and changes in personal circumstances such as incarceration, shifts in parental and relationship status, and health complications. Participants who repeatedly encountered incongruences between their idolised views of the gang and the everyday realities of its life parallelled Baumeister's (1994) concept of discontent crystallisation. By reversing the patterns of focal incidents, which are interpreted as life-changing events or turning points[57], Baumeister illustrates how the generalised dissatisfaction associated with the inherent aspects of a role can reshape individuals' perspectives on that role (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009).

[57]Please find further explanation on critical events or turning points in Chapter Two (pp. 32-34) and Chapter Three (p. 78).

Participants' accounts suggested that changes in personal circumstances also began to diminish their interest in continuing to adhere to the demands associated with the criminal gang role. These findings diverged from the conclusions of Berger et al. (2017), Bjørgo (2009), Decker et al. (2014), Moloney et al. (2009), and Warr (1998), who assert that age, imprisonment, changes in marital or parental status can serve as effective catalysts for instant and lasting criminal gang exit. This inconsistency may emerge from differing conceptualisations of what constitutes gang disengagement and desistance.

While previous studies often view these events as defining turning points anchoring desisters in conventional society, the present study, by focusing on participants' meaning-making and interpretation of events discovered that, such changes primarily raised initial doubts, which began to gradually pull participants away from the gang's strong gravitational force (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996). Hence, this shifting perspective, rather than triggering an immediate break from the gang life, increased participants' awareness of, and willingness to engage in an alternative lifestyle. In this context, circumstantial changes that gave rise to doubts were filtered through emotional processing, in which interpretations of events unfolded through an evaluative and reflective process over time.

Participants' receptivity to explore alternative roles beyond the gang is consistent with Giordano et al.'s (2002) first step of cognitive transformation theory and Maruna and Farrall's (2004) two-tier desistance concept. Both models emphasise that cognitive openness to experiment with new roles and temporary cessation of offending represents fundamental shift towards exiting a gang. Yet, at this stage, desistance remains only primary, as these new roles are typically not fully established to exert sufficient strength or motivational force to generate lasting gang disengagement or the internalisation of change. This finding counters prior research that overlooks interpretive processes, and in doing so, overstates the deterministic influence of factors, such as age, incarceration, or family circumstance changes. By bringing

into focus these internal processes, this study's findings cast light on why some participants continued to fluctuate between conventional roles and involvement in criminal gang activities.

Participants' oscillation process was prolonged and accompanied by serious internal discomfort. Drawing on Becker's (1960) concept of role side bets, Ebaugh (1988) convincingly argues that role exiters often experience a phase of role vacillation. The immense amount of time spent in a role can produce unanticipated consequences like deep emotional and social bonds to colleagues, which in turn can create crescive social commitment to the role.

While participants' experimentation with alternative roles brought them closer to the world outside the gang, it frequently provoked other members' disapproval. Experiences of bullying and harassment in response to their diminished adherence to gang role demands appeared to accelerate participants' crystallisation of discontent and ultimately hastened their disengagement from the gang's social grip. Conversely, dissuasion through temporary membership loss stalled other participants' criminal gang exit process. This aspect of the finding is inconsistent with Ebaugh's (1988) role exit framework, which posits that even premature exit from a stigmatised role can result in lasting change.

This inconsistency with Ebaugh's findings can be attributed to her model's limited attention to the emotional preparedness and contextual support necessary to produce enduring transition. As this study revealed that without stable foundation in prosocial settings, early or externally imposed ejection did not lead to participants' successful gang desistance, instead it left them in a state of psychological and social limbo, generating a role vacuum that drew them back into their default behaviours and relationships.

These findings align more closely with Maruna and Farrall's (2004) concept of proto-secondary desistance, which recognises that forced exclusion may disrupt behaviour temporarily, but in the absence of cognitive commitment and substantial support in the conventional settings, it is unlikely to generate long-term desistance. In other words,

withdrawal from the gang life can occur without the corresponding cognitive change or cessation of gang-related behaviour, however, such disengagement only lasts temporary. These insights, bring McNeill's (2014) argument to the forefront, which state that gang disengagement (and desistance more broadly) is not simply a behaviour shift, but a social process requiring both ongoing commitment and external validation.

After re-entering, participants seemed to be in a vulnerable and conflicted state. Having experienced some advantages of conventional life, yet unable to fully detach from the financial and social security offered by the gang, participants described feeling trapped in the criminal gang lifestyle. Burke (1991) argues when a role no longer fully meets one's expectations or provides adequate satisfaction, and viable role alternatives have not yet been firmly established, it can generate stress and anger toward the existing role (Stets & Tsushima, 2001). According to Bubolz and Simi (2015), this type of role frustration can lead to a complete break in role continuity, regardless of the risks or consequences pertaining to exiting. (This concept will be particularly relevant when participants' experiences of actual gang exit event are discussed.)

The themes in this section imply that participants' doubts about continuing with the gang lifestyle are important components in the onset of zig-zagging between the gang and the conventional worlds. Initial doubts, stemming from disillusionment and various changes in personal circumstances drove participants to experiment and engage in alternative roles outside the criminal gang. Discontent with existing roles and exposure to new ones reduced the gang's immense social grip. While active members' disapproval regarding participants' altered commitment precipitated criminal gang exit, for others it only triggered temporary discontinuation. Before turning to participants' direct accounts of leaving, the next section addresses pivotal moments they identified as critical to bring about instant gang exit or what the literature commonly refers to as specific events or turning points.

Specific Events

Both Ebaugh's (1988) role exit theory and Giordano et al.'s (2002) cognitive transformation theory recognise that certain critical events can exert sufficient influence to divorce individuals from their previous roles. In gang and crime desistance literature (Hirschi, 1969; Laub & Sampson, 1993; Sampson & Laub, 2016; Sampson & Laub, 2017), such events are commonly referred to as turning points, as they present appealing alternatives through the "set of hooks for change" embedded within them (Giordano et al., 2002, p. 1000).

One of the most referenced turning points is the obtainment of a "steady job" (Laub & Sampson, 1993, p. 315). While several scholarly articles namely Rutter (1996), Sampson and Laub (1995), Workman (2014), and Yahner et al., (2016) support its strong correlation, this study found employment was not a critical factor in inducing gang exit. Participants only identified meaningful employment as a significant factor in maintaining gang desistance and, instead, credited abrupt gang exit to three critical events such as fatherhood (Moloney et al., 2009; Savolainen, 2009), relocation (Bottoms & Shapland, 2011; Bottoms et al., 2004; Flynn, 2010; Weaver, 2019) and religious beliefs (Giordano et al., 2008; Maruna et al., 2006).

Although these particular moments often carried perceived transformative power, Baumeister (1994), Carlsson (2012), Giordano et al. (2002) and recently Klaus (2022) argue that such events are only symbolic as individuals are not passive observers of their own life but active agents who, based on prior experiences, constantly calculate the advantages and disadvantages of their decisions. Thus, while specific events might be identified as catalysts for change, they are always preceded and supported by a series of pre-existing and often overlooked contributing factors (Ebaugh, 1988).

Indeed, participants' life stories supported the observations of Baumeister (1994), Carlsson (2012), Giordano et al. (2002), and Klaus (2022), as none of the specific events seemed to be isolated occurrences. Rather, they were predated by other important incidents,

which were also crucial ingredients for gradually disrupting and weakening the gang's social grip. For instance, participants who began to attend church, became fathers, or relocated did not simply wake up one day and decide to abandon a long-standing commitment to the criminal gang life. Their decisions were influenced by prior experiences, such as the threat of long-term imprisonment, growing disillusionment with the gang life, the birth of the first or subsequent child, and concerns for the safety of significant others. Therefore, in this study single events could be credited as the catalyst for turning points, because, these events were interlinked with other previous occurrences that planted participants' initial doubts. By working in tandem, these experiences facilitated the decision to exit the gang.

The Event of Criminal Gang Exit and its Immediate Consequences

Participants reported diverse immediate consequences for leaving the gang. The most vivid accounts described severe physical assaults as a consequence for exiting. These accounts undergirded Fleisher and Decker's (2001) and Tamatea's (2015) observation that leaving a gang can be fraught with danger because of the gang's "blood out rule" (Fleisher & Decker, 2001, p. 69), a practice intended to deter disengagement. As noted earlier, despite the anticipation of harmful events and loss of side bets, intense role frustration often compels individuals to follow through with the exit process (Bubolz & Simi, 2015; Burke, 1991).

Contrary to Dunbar's (2018, p. 47) claim that "evidence of gang exit involving violence is rarely found in the research," participants consistently recounted being subjected to hostile exit rituals. These findings not only refute Dunbar's generalisation but also illuminate the emotional toll and physical consequences of gang exit. By highlighting the role of violence and verbal threats that inducted fear and guilt for exiting, this study advances the understanding of the underexamined dynamics of coercive persuasions that shape the disengagement process.

Alongside violence, participants also faced sceptical remarks about their ability to succeed in the conventional society, which supported the findings of Dunbar (2018), Bjørgo

(2009), and Decker and Lauristen (2002). In addition to confrontation, participants' stories highlighted the experience of substantial economic loss and psychological trauma ensuing their exit. These experiences converge with Ebaugh's (1988) observations of nuns exiting their role and mothers relinquishing their parental rights, who also felt emotionally drained and isolated after their role exits. For participants, social isolation also created a psychological vacuum, which at times, manifested as severe emotional disturbances, such as depression and anxiety.

The interpretive phenomenological analysis of participants' accounts revealed that criminal gang members often face multiple ramifications at the time or immediately after announcing their desire to exit the gang. Although opinions among gang researchers vary about the rituals and consequences of gang exit, this study's findings support these differing views, highlighting that exiting triggers physical, social, psychological, and fiscal repercussions.

Conclusion

In this phase, participants' gang disengagement experiences were discussed through the lens of Ebaugh's (1988) role exit and Giordano et al.'s (2002) cognitive transformation theoretical concepts. The themes supported Maruna and Farrall's (2004) view that criminal gang exit is not a sudden event; rather, multiple external and internal factors that give rise to initial doubts about continued commitment to the gang life, which signal the onset of primary desistance. While a few accounts indicated less challenging transitions, many others revealed that critical obstacles like other members' disapproval about alternative roles experimentation or difficulty abandoning the gang's side bets rendered the gang exit process drawn out and oscillating. Despite these challenges and the anticipated (and actual) repercussions, role frustration gradually produced crystalised discontent with the gang role. Specific events played a key role in providing the courage to change life course by exiting the criminal gang and incepting the process of criminal gang desistance maintenance.

Stages of Gang Desistance Maintenance Continuum

The analysis, while illustrating the imminent consequences of exit, illuminated participants' continual efforts to manage the enduring exit ramifications. This validated Maruna's (2001) notion that criminal gang desistance is not a single event, but rather an ongoing process. This section by focusing on discussing the various strategies participants used to navigate complications during gang desistance extends the current understanding of how gang free lifestyle is maintained. Moreover, this study shows that participants' approaches to overcoming challenges, particularly those related to managing societal stigma, align with Siegel et al.'s (1988) conceptualisation of stigma management continuum.

Based on the styles in which participants responded to the gang desistance challenges, the maintenance process was observed to unfold across three interrelated stages: initial**,** integration**,** and desister. This is a significant finding, because it highlights that beyond the event of gang exit, during these various stages of the desistance continuum, participants needed to apply and rely on different strategies, mobilise self-efficacy, and possess goal-oriented approach to integrate into prosocial communities and solidify their desister identities.

The Initial Stage

In the early stage of desistance maintenance, common remnants of gang involvement such as criminal records, limited ties to conventional society, and self-doubt hindered participants' reintegration efforts. They frequently reported that the implications of their former gang involvement manifested as difficulties to obtain gainful employment. Consistent with Berger et al. (2017), Bottoms and Shapland (2011), and Maruna (2001) ongoing financial hardship can push former gang members to consider or even engage in criminal activities to generate income. However, support from immediate family members and discouragement from former gang associates typically deterred participants from reengaging with the criminal gang

lifestyle. Nugent and Schinkel (2016) describe immediate family support as the primary source of reinforcement for criminal gang desistance.

Notably, former gang members' discouragement emerged as a significant and somewhat unexpected protective factor against relapsing into the criminal gang lifestyle. This finding challenges the commonly held assumption (Pyrooz and Decker, 2011; Pyrooz et al., 2014) that ongoing ties with former associates pose a risk for drawing ex-members back into the gang lifestyle. Evidently the social influence that once fostered gang involvement was inverted and participants' meaningful relationships with their former associates became a supportive factor for their desistance efforts. This insight highlights that successful transformation does not require complete social detachment from gang affiliated contacts. Hence, this finding offers a valuable contribution to desistance scholarship by portraying the role of former associates as potential assets rather than inhibitors to the desistance process.

Additionally, at this stage, as outlined by Lee and Craft (2002), Schneider and Conrad (1980), and Siegel et al. (1998), reactive stigma coping methods, such as concealment and secrecy helped participants reorient and achieve personally desired conventional goals like securing employment or entering an educational course.

The Integration Stage

Soon after obtaining employment, volunteer positions, or entering education or religious institutions, participants began reintegrating into these prosocial arenas. Although, initially, participants remained guarded in these new settings, as they grew familiar with their new roles and perceived acceptance, they became less defensive about their past. The sense of validation, therefore, encouraged participants to confide in trusted others.

Schneider and Conrad (1980) refer to this stage as a testing period, where individuals gauge others' reaction to the disclosure of potentially stigmatising attributes. Siegel et al. (1998, p. 14) describe this "test[ing] the waters" or gradual disclosure as a reactive stigma

management strategy, since interactions during this phase are largely restricted to only those who demonstrate acceptance of the discredited characteristics.

Yet, positive social encounters in the new community clearly encouraged participants to reconnect and repair relationships with other prosocial groups. They reached out to mend eroded relationships with extended family, law enforcement, various prosocial networks, and even former associates. Drawing on Colley's (1902) looking glass theory, McNeill (2014, para. 3) posits that "desistance is a social process as much as a personal one." Thus, beyond behavioural change, recognition of one's transformed identity by reference groups can reinforce and sustain shifts in self-perception.

This reciprocal process of social validation and sustained personal transformation was most clearly reflected in participants' attempts to conform. Several participants modified their appearance and refined their behaviour to gain further acceptance and accomplish deeper integration into the broader prosocial community. According to Ebaugh (1988), discarding symbolic markers and paraphernalia of former role is a key feature of role exit. In the context of gang exit, Rosen and Cruz (2018) similarly found, that former members often remove visible symbols of gang affiliation to fully immerse themselves into the conventional environments.

Identification as a Desister Stage

Although all participants identified as criminal gang desisters, few accomplished what Maruna and Farrall (2004) call secondary desistance, and Nugent and Schinkel (2016) describe as identity desistance, which refer to overt communication of authentic transformation demonstrated via appearance, conduct, formulation of prosocial relations, and assumption of prosocial roles. Various factors suggested participants' successful adoption of identity desistance. First, consistent with Giordano et al.'s (2002) final stage of cognitive shift, they demonstrated a sustained pattern of conformity by regarding past behaviours unattractive and personally irrelevant, despite maintaining some links with former gang associates.

Indeed, the findings revealed that the majority of participants did not fit Pyrooz and Decker's (2011, p. 423) "true desisters" category, defined as former members who "no longer have attachments to members of their former gangs and no longer engage in activities (criminal or noncriminal) with those members" (Decker & Lauristen, 2002, p. 64). Although several participants retained emotional and social connections with selected former associates, they refrained from engaging in the core goals of the gang and no longer participated in criminal activity. Instead, they became accepted prosocial affiliates either through reconciled relationships or aging through gang life. This key finding underpins the earlier conclusion that successful transformation and adoption of a prosocial role does not require complete social detachment from former associates. As observed by Brown et al. (2023) and Gilbert (2013) lingering or retained gang connections are common amongst ANZ ethnic gangs due to the expansive and strong kinship ties that continue to bind former members to the gang.

The second factor indicating desister identity adoption was participants' enhanced stigma coping skills. Participants who developed an improved sense of purpose and greater embeddedness in various communities, including redefined relationships with their former gang networks, were better equipped to defy stigma and reappraise the core issue of social stigma production. Public management of lingering gang ties (Shih, 2004) and the overt and voluntary acknowledgment of past-self demonstrated participants' disregard for negative conventional narratives and showed consistence with Siegel et al.'s (1998) proactive stigma management styles. Proactive strategies, such as pre-emptive disclosure and public education, provided participants opportunities to seize control over information exchange by engaging in discussions to alter the public's negative perception of transformed criminal gang members.

Open and public communication of transformation from criminal gang involvement also served as "reintegration ceremonies" (Braithwaite & Mugford, 1994, p. 140) through which participants experienced a process of elevation or delabelling on larger societal scale

(Lofland, 1969; Meisenhelder, 1982; Trice & Roman, 1970). Besides these proactive stigma approaches, the use of lived experiences supported professional development and retroflexive reformation[58] (Brown, 1991b; Cressey, 1955, 1965; Lebel, 2007; Maruna, 2001; Radak, 2016). Reinforced transformation through provision of therapeutic input is also recognised by authors like Brown (1991b), Ebaugh (1988), Maruna (2001), and Workman (2014), who suggest that wounded healers, rather than completely knifing off[59] past personal attributes, draw on and incorporate residual elements of such attributes to improve occupational strategy and status.

However, public disclosure also yielded unfavourable outcomes. Even long after exiting and demonstrating sustained, authentic transformation, the past criminal gang member role continued to result in encounters with social stigma. Participants' keen awareness of and strategic management of the hangover identity suggested the emergence of a desister identity.

Participants who retained some gang connections were nevertheless perceived as exiters in the eyes of the active members because of their abandonment of the normative gang practises. As Decker and his colleagues' (2014) observe, this differs from the public's perspective as former gang members may still feel that their past membership haunts their present life even long after exiting. Indeed, maintained relationship with gang affiliates often led the public to continue to see participants as active members, since their ties to the gang as a reference group typically carried more weight than actual behavioural transformation. To prove their authentic transformation and alter the perception of being an active gang member, participants in later stages of desistance continuum typically engaged in delabelling and reintegration ceremonies.

This aspect of the findings is instrumental in explaining the concept of desistance maintenance continuum as it illuminates how participants' active self-reflection and motivation

[58]This theory is further explained in Chapter Two (p. 53)

[59]Please find a detailed explanation about concept of the knifing off in Chapter One (p. 9)

to change enabled to manage early challenges and progressively see themselves, and be perceived by others, as desisters. However, it stands in contrast with Nugent and Schinkel's (2016, p. 580) conclusion, which highlight how being discredited by the society at large leads transformed criminals/gang members to feel "stuck in a liminal position: neither offenders nor those who have 'made good'." Perhaps, those who have undergone considerable reformation can come to truly understand that this liminal phase has no permanency. Rather, it represents a temporary, though undoubtedly frustrating, aspect of the desistance maintenance continuum. Overcoming this phase requires activating traits that are categorically necessary for driving change. Healy (2014) and Maruna (2001) identify that such traits include positive attitude, self-efficacy, and motivation, as well as participation in ceremonies to "publicly and formally… announce, sell and spread the fact of Actor's new kind of being" (Lofland, 1969, p. 227).

Conclusion

Despite the local and international gang literature framing criminal gang desistance as a single event, occurring at the time of gang exit, Maruna's (2001) long-standing assertion highlights that desistance is better understood as a dynamic continuously unfolding process that requires ongoing maintenance. This incongruity brings attention to the theoretical conflict between the single event-based conceptualisation of desistance (Laub et al., 1998; Moloney et al., 2009; Uggen, 2000; Warr, 1998) that implies a relatively instantaneous transformation, and transformational models such as Maruna and Farrall's (2004) secondary desistance and Giordano et al.'s (2002) cognitive transformation, which demonstrates how desistance unfolds incrementally through internal shifts and negotiations of external factors. This study's findings support the transformational models because participants' lives presented many psychological, structural, and relational complexities which they were required to navigate post-exit. Eventually, it was their motivation, perseverance, and effective use of various stigma coping strategies that supported and advanced their reintegration.

The ways in which participants managed the implications and repercussions of former criminal gang involvement aligned with the strategies used by other stigmatised groups, such as Siegel at al.'s (1998) study of HIV/gay men and Schneider and Conrad's (1980) research on epileptics. Participants' responses to both perceived and actual stigma seemed to follow a progressive order. Their approaches to handling prejudice and discrimination, (re)connecting with prosocial institutions, and navigating prosocial role expectations illuminated a three-stage continuum of gang desistance.

This three-stage model offers a substantial contribution to the desistance literature, as it systematically dissects the distinct yet closely interconnected stages that participants navigated in their efforts to maintain gang desistance. The stages are not only overlapping but also build upon one another. In doing so, they mutually reinforce and support transition that leads to the achievement of identity transformation. Each stage in the model illuminates the different strategies and skills participants employed for achieving a gradual movement from gang-centric behaviours towards the adoption of prosocial roles. Hence, these stages both individually and collectively highlight participants' interpretation of desistance maintenance, which entails active engagement in navigating the pressures of stigma and criminogenic needs.

However, the sequence of coping strategies participants employed across the three stages cannot be meaningfully separated from the preceding life course phases namely the processes of gang entry and gang disengagement. Jointly, these phases provide a deeper and more coherent understanding of why participants' maintenance of desistance unfolded as a staged continuum. By following this chronological order, this section articulated the congruencies and incongruencies between the extant literature and this study's findings on gang entry, gang exit, and gang desistance and through that its significant contribution to the body of knowledge on desistance. More importantly, the integrated life phases that culminate in the desistance maintenance not only illuminated participants' transformation efforts and journeys

but also laid the foundation for a more focused analytical framework of the study. Accordingly, the following section by drawing on the interpretation and analysis of findings, as well as the newly formulated insights, addresses and unpacks the study's core objectives and research questions without strictly adhering to the life course chronological order.

Review of the Research Objectives

The study's objectives were set to explore the relationship between gang desistance and stigma management, particularly how stigma may hinder the progression of desistance. By presenting the three life course phases, gang entry, exit, and desistance maintenance, the study demonstrated a combination of external and internal stimuli influencing participants' decision to join, leave, and remain free of involvement in criminal gang activities. These life course phases are equally important for understanding the intricate process that unfolds beyond the event of criminal gang exit, during which desisting criminal gang members actively engage in stigma coping strategies to advance their reintegration and identity transformation.

To examine and initiate a dialogue about the varying stigma management methods desisting gang members employ to navigate the challenges of reintegration and to accomplish conventional goals, the following research questions were posed. For ease of reference, these questions, first presented in Chapter One (p. 5) are listed here again:

1. What experiences of stigma do desisting gang members have?
2. How do experiences of stigma impact on desisting gang members' emerging former gang member identity development?
3. How do desisting gang members protect their emerging desired identity in the face of adversity?
4. How does the emerging former gang member identity contribute to the changes in the desisting gang member's social networks?

While, each question is considered through the lens of the study's findings and situated in the context of existing literature, the following section addresses the first two questions individually, but it discusses the third and the fourth questions jointly. The latter two questions are addressed together because previous discussions point out, the protection of the emerging desister identity is inherently shaped by desisters' reintegration efforts into their wider social arenas. In my view, this renders the analytical interpretation of these factors inseparable.

What Experiences of Stigma do Desisting Gang Members Have?

Consistent with both local and the international studies (Alleyne & Wood, 2014; Farrington, 2005; Howell & Egley, 2005; Kempe et al., 1962; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Lipsey & Derzon, 1999; Thornberry et al., 1993), this study found that adverse familial conditions, like single parent household, parental maltreatment, unrealistic expectations, alongside parental gang association contributed to the development of delinquent and socially objectionable behaviours. These early disadvantages often shaped participants' self-perception, generating a sense of inferiority and disconnection from their prosocial peers (Thornberry, Krohn, et al., 2003; Thornberry, Lizotte, et al., 2003). In institutional settings, such as schools and neighbourhoods, these personal traits were frequently discriminated or rejected, reinforcing participants' feelings of otherness or being different. Social exclusion generated participants' glamorised view of gangs as appealing alternative peer groups offering tolerance and promotion of delinquency, comradery, restored social status, and refuge from social stigma. (Becker, 1963; Decker & Lauristen, 2002; Hagedorn, 2008; Tamatea, 2017)

Consistent with Melde and Esbensen's (2011) conclusion, the interpretive phenomenological analysis of the data revealed that gang entry represented a significant turning point for the participants. Gang involvement had a profound impact on participants' life trajectories, because the accelerated antisocial forms of conduct resulted in increased social isolation, particularly from non-gang affiliated family members and prosocial institutions

(Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Klein & Maxson, 2006). Moreover, overt identification as a gang member, expressed through changes in appearance, dress, and demeanour, added to participants' public stigmatisation and rendered many prosocial institutions either inaccessible or undesirable (Andrae et al., 2017b; Phelan & Hunt, 1998; Sanders, 1988; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). Participants' growing sense of alienation deepened criminal gang embeddedness, which in turn created long-term barriers to reintegration after exit (Moffitt, 1993; Pyrooz et al., 2015; Sampson & Laub, 1996).

Goffman's (1963) concept of triple stigmatisation encompassing weak prosocial ties, criminal records, and indelible signs of gang affiliation proved highly pertinent to participants' experiences during the desistance phase. Recent scholarship and study's findings confirm the notion that these intersecting stigmas continue to socially alienate desisting criminal gang members, impeding their access to conventional institutions and opportunities (Dziewanski, 2020; LeBel, 2012; Lee & Bubolz, 2020; Nugent & Schinkel, 2016; Rosen & Cruz, 2018; Tamatea, 2017). Amongst the most serious ramification of gang involvement is the difficulty in obtaining gainful employment. Participants often faced multiple barriers when it came to securing employment because of their lack of formal qualifications and criminal records. These challenges not only constrained their access to legitimate opportunities to make money but also undermined their desistance process by reinforcing stigmatised identities and social exclusion (Farrall et al., 2014; Harding, 2003; Maruna, 2001). The next section discusses how employment discrimination and other post-exit challenges shape identity transformation and the sustenance of criminal gang desistance.

How do Experiences of Stigma Impact on Desisting Gang Members' Emerging Former Gang Member Identity Development?

In line with the findings of Berger et al. (2017) and Decker et al. (2014), this study highlights that gang disengagement is a gradual and multifaceted procedure that occurs over time and several distinct steps. Disillusionment with gang life and changes in personal circumstances such as imprisonment, becoming a parent, and health complications weakened participants' commitment to the criminal gang (Ebaugh, 1988; Giordano et al., 2002). This eroding attachment initiated consideration or tentative experimentation with alternative roles.

However, anticipated and/or enacted stigma in conventional settings hindered participants' transitional efforts. LeBel et al. (2008) and Maruna and LeBel (2010) find that such stigma can undermine criminal gang members' willingness and ability to swiftly establish new roles and adopt new identities outside the gang, thus, prolonging the disengagement period. Participants' perceived or actual experiences of discrimination often manifested in oscillation between the criminal gang and the conventional worlds, creating a cycle of ambivalence or what Maruna and Farrall (2004, p. 5) describe as "proto-secondary desistance" (Carlsson, 2012; Matza, 1964; Poleschek & Yesberg, 2015).

Participants' abated gang commitment often provoked agnostic and hostile responses from other members. Harassment and forced temporary gang exit are not uncommon to deter the exit process, particularly when desisters lack the social capital, skills, or access to accomplish desired goals outside the gang (Bjørgo, 2009; Decker & Lauristen, 2002; Harding, 2003). These intra-gang dynamics and external barriers hindered participants' development of a coherent former gang member identity and negatively impacted on their full disengagement (Ebaugh, 1988; Major & O'Brien, 2005).

Following the event of exit, participants often struggled to gain access to employment or other prosocial institution because of criminal records, limited qualifications, or visible

markers of past affiliation (Demello, 1993; Link et al., 1989; McNaughton, 2007; Phelan & Hunt, 1998; Rosenfeld et al., 1999). Such experiences heightened financial hardship and a sense of social isolation, increasing the risk of relapse into criminal activities and reengagement with former associates to partake in such activities (LeBel et al., 2008). Therefore, experiences of social stigma and exclusion can stall or reverse the desistance process, particularly in the absence of protective internal resources (like self-efficacy and motivation) and external supports (such as family members' encouragement and other deterrents). The way in which these protective factors operated to reorient and advance participants' progression toward sustained desistance are addressed in the response to the following two research questions.

How do Desisting Gang Members Protect Their Emerging Desired Identity in the Face of Adversity? How does the Emerging Former Gang Member Identity Contribute to the Changes in the Desisting Gang Member's Social Networks?

Parallel with findings of previous stigma focused studies (Lee & Craft, 2002; Schneider & Conrad, 1980; Siegel et al., 1998), participants in this study employed various strategies to protect themselves from judgement and prejudice in the conventional settings. In the initial stage of criminal gang desistance, when social isolation and financial insecurity were still pronounced, participants' stigma responses were primarily, what Siegel at al. (1998) describe as reactive. Although these defensive tactics, such as secrecy or concealment of past-self were common, support from significant others, including former associates helped participants reorient their attention and gain access to desired conventional goals (such as employment or education) (Goffman, 1963; Nugent & Schinkel, 2016).

Reintegration typically began once participant entered a conventional or occupational setting. While participants initially maintained caution, they gradually became more willing to disclose past gang involvement as familiarity with role expectations and established collegial

relationships increased. This shift in participants' approach to potential stigma was often triggered by a sense of acceptance in the new social context, where they came to realise that their anticipation of stigma was greater than its actual enactment. According to Uggen et al. (2004), validation by even a few like "the own and the wise" (Goffman, 1963, p. 19), can significantly escalate role commitment and hook former criminal gang members into their new identities (Giordano et al., 2002; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009).

To demonstrate commitment to their new identity and soften the impact of scrutiny, participants consciously altered their conduct and appearance. These efforts often attracted validation from prosocial family members, law enforcement agencies, and other community stakeholders, reinforcing the perception of sustained transformation (Braithwaite & Mugford, 1994). Building social capital through reconciling eroded relationships, forging new connections in prosocial arenas, and receiving professional recognition further strengthened participants' desister identities and detachment from criminal gang life (Laub & Sampson, 1993; Moule et al., 2013).

The likelihood of abandoning concealment strategies in favour of public acknowledgement of the discredited characteristics increased as participants' perception of acceptance, recognition, and validation developed in conventional settings. The pre-emptive type of disclosure referred to by Schneider and Conrad (1980, p. 40) as "preventive telling" allowed participants greater control over personal information. However, it also exposed them to further stigmatisation in larger social arenas (Goffman, 1963; Siegel et al., 1998; Winnick & Bodkin, 2008). Participants with substantial ties to conventional institutions approached this risk of hangover identification by critically evaluating the sources of stigma and challenging dominant narratives about former criminal gang members (Healy, 2014; Maruna, 2001).

Importantly, not all characteristics associated with former gang identities were discarded. Similarly to Brown's (1991b) and Workman's (2014) observations, many

participants drew on vestiges of former gang member identity to provide specialist services, particularly in the fields of counselling, youth mentoring, social and community working, and faith-based services. Presentation as a professional-ex or wounded healer generated greater recognition for professional integrity and reduced reliance on reactive stigma management by demonstrating authenticity of reformation (Brown, 1991b; Frank, 1995; Maruna, 2001).

Overall, stigma and the strategies applied to soften its impact were socially constructed and continually negotiated, depending on how participants saw themselves through the eyes of the others and how they perceived their standing in society (Cooley, 1902; Link et al., 1989; McNeill, 2016; Mead, 1934). Yet, while recognition of change in the wider social context was central to identity development, such recognition was often slow to manifest, thus, it was emotionally taxing. The following section reflects on the implications of the findings by bringing attention to existing social work interventions and proposing ways to reconsider support for preventing criminal gang entry, facilitating gang disengagement, and alleviating the frustration that criminal gang desistance maintenance may entail.

Implications of the Findings

The discussion of the findings' implications follows the order of the three major life phases: entry, exit, and maintenance. While this section offers review of the existing intervention programmes designed to prevent criminal gang entry and support gang exit, it is important to note that evaluation of these programmes was not the primary objective of this study. Yet, the practice-oriented character of social work naturally invites reflections on the findings' practical implications (Berger, 1963). As Shardlow (2007, p. 13) points out "[s]ocial workers are expected to have a broadly-based professional understanding that integrates knowledge derived from a range of academic and professional disciplines into a coherent and usable form, which can be directly applied in practice."

It is, therefore, important to acknowledge that programmes like Oranga Rangatahi's and Circles of Support and Accountability's positive impact on disrupting the perpetuation of criminal gang involvement. This section explores how such interventions could be enhanced to better prevent at-risk individuals from joining gangs, to accelerate the exit process for those who are already involved and to support their maintenance of gang desistance. Given that social workers already actively engage with hard-to-reach gang communities, the following discussion centres around their strategic role in reducing the harms linked with criminal gangs.

Entry Phase: Addressing Early Marginalisation and Gang Glorification

The findings of this study consistently align with previous research conclusions on gang identity formulation. These studies highlight that gang involvement can be traced to individuals' chronic and repeated traumatic experiences in their familial settings (Farrington, 2005; Farrington et al., 2001; Hill et al., 1999; Howell & Egley, 2005; Lemert, 1951). In addition, findings of prior research demonstrate that environmental factors are also instrumental in shaping pathways into gang engagement (Breetzke et al., 2021; Brown et al., 2023; Flynn, 2010; Gilbert, 2024; Thrasher, 1927). In this study, participants identified that their socialisation and interactions in their familial and spatial settings fostered behaviours that, in turn, led to disconnection and rejection from prosocial family members and peer groups.

This sense of marginalisation, derived from engaging in delinquent or antisocial behaviours, gave rise to the glorification of an alternative peer group that not only accepted but promoted delinquency, offered protection, status, financial means, and a sense of refuge from discrimination. Thus, participants viewed the gang lifestyle appealing, which upon entering, exerted its gravitational pull that drew them deeper into its norms and practices. Previous studies also recognise the gangs' powerful social grip that produces immersion in its culture, erosion of remaining prosocial ties, escalation of antisocial and delinquent behaviour, and

changes in conduct, appearance, and anticipation of long-term affiliation (Gilbert, 2013; Moule et al., 2013; Tamatea, 2015, 2017; van Gemert & Fleisher, 2005).

When gangs cemented their presence in the ANZ social tapestry, they began to draw significant attention and prompted various governmental reactions aimed at mitigating their harm. Although early responses were predominantly suppression-based (Taonui & Newbold, 2013) (Ministry of Social Development-Te Manatū Whakahiato Ora, 2008), in 1981 Parliamentary Report (Committee on Gangs, 1981) urged the trial of intervention and prevention programmes to reduce social costs caused by gangs. Following this report, interventions such as the Community Education Initiative Scheme and Project Employment Programme (Gilbert, 2013; O'Connor, 1986) and later Fresh Start (Ministry of Social Development-Te Manatū Whakahiato Ora, n.d.; Social Investement Agency-Toi Hau Tāngata, 2012) were introduced to reduce the number of young people becoming gang involved by offering job and training opportunities, helping set prosocial goals, and delivering targeted interventions to address offending behaviour.

While both of these initiatives (earlier being defunct now) have contributed positively to gang and crime reduction, Oranga Tamariki piloted Oranga Rangatahi preventive intervention programme as a multi-agency strategic approach is a promising response to address the gang issue. Its effectiveness lies in its targeted prevention and intervention strategies, which integrate cultural elements in community- and iwi-based cross-agency initiatives. However, it is only rolled out in some of ANZ most at-risk communities (Marama et al., 2023). At its core, Oranga Rangatahi seeks to address the underlying drivers of gang involvement within and beyond the at-risk young people's family contexts such as lack of parental supervision or discipline, parental role models, absence of positive role models, parental substance abuse, familial criminality.

This strategy aligns with the factors participants identified as precursors to gang involvement. Accordingly, social workers deliver programmes and provide assistance including parenting guidance, advocacy, or connection to other service not only tailored to young person but also the needs of parents, caregivers, and extended families. This holistic intervention fosters growth and confidence within the family units by challenging intergenerational stigma, anchoring young persons in their community, and reorienting their attention to prosocial activities (school, church, and employment).

The Oranga Rangatahi programme's multi-systemic approach and coordinated partnerships (involving schools, non-government social sector and faith-based services, Police, Oranga Tamariki, iwi, family members) are designed to reduce difficulties of inter-agency collaboration (Ministry of Children-Oranga Tamariki, 2023a; Tamatea, 2018). This integrated, preventive response disrupts the negative impacts of familial and spatial factors that participants in this study identified to increase their susceptibility to delinquency, alienation from prosocial peers, and glamorisation of criminal gangs (Wallace, 2017). Additionally, intensive and ongoing mentoring is instrumental in supporting at-risk youths' (re)engagement with prosocial activities (Brown et al., 2023; Dunbar, 2018; Faleolo, 2014; Tamatea, 2018).

The findings of this study also revealed that spatial factors such as schools and neighbourhoods generated a sense of discrimination and subsequently alienation for the participants. Schools that adopt current zero tolerance policies, relying on "exclusionary measures such as suspension and expulsion" (Carroll-Lind, 2010, p. 82) to address student violence and bullying, may find these approaches counterproductive. Rather than resolving these issues, such measures "further exclude and isolate young people who have acted violently and sever their ties to the school" (Faleolo, 2014, p. 245). Social Workers in School (SWiS)

can help circumvent these negative outcomes, provided that the schools and provider agencies[60] allow flexibility to support young people with educational and behavioural challenges outside school hours (Ministry of Children-Oranga Tamariki, 2023b).

While SWiS, Oranga Tamariki, and other community-based agencies like Whanau Ora work collaboratively with the young person's family unit to address the family's needs, additional youth services involving mentors, youth workers, or social workers could provide extra support before and after school. Intensive mentoring, including daily engagement with the young person to ensure that school attendance is at a high-rate, and engagement in after-school activities like sports, music, or crafts can help divert attention from delinquent activities while fostering social skill and character development (Gottfredson et al., 2004). Additionally constructive weekend and holiday activities, such as bush camps and both outdoor and indoor sports, may decrease unsupervised time and exposure to neighbourhood environments that my pose risk for increased opportunities for delinquent peer association (Eggleston, 1997).

While these interventions may provide additional support and prevention for youth who consider entering the gang, engagement with those, who are affected by the gang's social suction effect can be complicated. However, as both the relevant literature and the study's findings show, certain life events can and do foster discontent with the criminal gang lifestyle. These moments of dissatisfaction represent key opportunities to reshape criminal gang members' perception of prosocial institutions and reorient their life-course.

Disengagement Phase: Supporting Ambivalence and Role Exit

Findings of prior research consistently show that the gang exit process is drawn out and unfolds through a series of identifiable steps (Berger et al., 2017; Decker et al., 2014; Dziewanski, 2020). In this study, participants' narratives also shed light on the gradual nature

[60]Social Workers in Schools are employed by Non-Government Organisation social service providers not the school, but they work in partnership with school staff as part of the school community (Oranga Tamariki Ministry of Children, 2023c).

of gang disengagement. For participants, the decision to leave a gang was often prompted by disillusionment with gang dynamics, incarceration, or changes in their personal circumstances. While these experiences gave rise to initial doubts about continuing gang involvement, they were not powerful enough to trigger sudden gang exit. However, such events became crucial in initiating oscillation between the gang and non-gang worlds as identified in the role exit theory (Ebaugh, 1988), cognitive transformation theory (Giordano et. al, 2002), and concept of proto-secondary desistance (Maruna & Farrall, 2004)

From the participants' narratives it became evident that those who came to the attention of justice system and were compelled to engage in therapeutic interventions that aimed at addressing the underlying causes of offending behaviour while incorporating cultural components such as tikanga, were more likely to begin questioning their continued gang involvement. However, participants generally had strained relationships and fractured ties to prosocial intuitions. As a result, those who did not come to the attention of authorities had limited motivation to engage with, or access such intervention programmes.

Although Decker and Lauristen (2002, p. 66) pinpoint violence as a major triggering factor for ambivalence regarding gang continuity, their suggestion that "[s]eizing opportunities when gang members … reflect on the risks of their participation in the gang and to question the viability of their membership" is a particularly relevant to this study's findings. As one of the key insights of gangs, this study highlighted that gang members are willing to engage and seek support for life challenges but tend to turn to those whom they know or trust. This supports the importance of designing intervention programmes that are capable of gaining access to the gang communities and building trust with their members, as demonstrated by the Salvation Army's drug intervention initiative (Dunn, 2013).

Intervention programme must recognise how specific gang communities operate and employ culturally competent workers, particularly those with lived experiences, who can

identify with and build rapport with gang members (Dunbar, 2018). This is paramount as Tamatea (2018, p. 69) outlined "establishing trust was seen as one of the most critical challenges for providers who routinely worked with gang members." Reformed gang members, or wounded healers, therefore, can be highly effective mentors in this field (Maruna, 2001). Their credibility and lived experience position them to access hard-to-reach gang communities and reach ambivalent members (Cressey, 1955).

As a result of the gang's strong social and financial pull, participants in this study often noted that their ambivalence about leaving persisted over a prolonged period. Hence, intervention programmes should be designed to offer long-term engagement that gradually builds relationship with gang members, with the aim of reducing the subcultural differences and challenging the mutual stereotyping that stems from the perception that gang members are indoctrinated into an anti-establishment worldview, thus, continually engage in resistance to formal authority (Tamatea, 2018). This sense of relatedness and rapport can lay the ground for developing meaningful and trustworthy working alliances.

Participants' stories also highlighted that active gang members often viewed those who began to voice or signal their ambivalence about gang commitment with scrutiny and suspicion. To ensure the safety of both ambivalent members and social agents, meetings should be arranged in neutral and culturally safe spaces such as maraes or churches.

Although these interventions could reduce the amount of time ambivalent members oscillate between the gang and non-gang worlds and may accelerate the occurrence of critical events, or turning points, they should not force rapid gang exit without proper and adequate connections to community groups (Laub & Sampson, 1993; Sampson & Laub, 2016; Warr, 1998). As participants identified, premature gang exit often led them back to the gang because of the absence of support in the conventional settings. These reflections intersect with what

Maruna and Farrall (2004) describe as proto-secondary desistance or early efforts towards change that more often than not led to gang re-entry.

Hence, interventions should be designed to scaffold behaviour improvements (such as attention to health and engagement in therapeutic interventions) and "broader life style areas (e. g., increasing time out of prison, employment, quality time with whānau)", rather than primarily targeting gang exit (Tamatea, 2018, p. 67). In this instance, the role of transformed gang members and social workers could be essential in working with ambivalent members to reach a turning point in their gang-centric life-course. This study identified three critical events that participants' commonly attributed to their gang exit.

One of the most significant event that accelerated participants' disengagement process was the birth of their first or subsequent child. Participants' awareness of the risks their continued involvement posed to their whānau was evident in the findings. Nevertheless, social workers can strengthen this motivation early on by discussing the broader potential hazards of gang lifestyles such as being separated from the child(ren) (as a consequence of incarceration) or the risk of inter-gang conflict posing serious harm or death to child or spouse. Through these discussions, social workers can provide an in-depth perspective on the desisters' emerging roles as parents and help raise their commitment to a prosocial life.

Similarly, this study found that engagement with religious institutions can bring on significant life changes, triggering gang exit. Faith-based or religious environments, where unconditional acceptance was experienced anchored participants in conventionally expected norms through providing a supportive community and promoting a sense of direction and purpose through avenues such as further education and qualifications.

From this perspective, faith-based communities can improve desisters' navigation of gang exit challenges, links to prosocial groups, and precipitation of reinsertion in broader community contexts (Johnson, 2004; Maruna, 2001; Maruna et al., 2006). Therefore, the

significant influence of religious revocations should also be recognised during the design of gang disengagement programmes. These interventions, alongside social workers and reformed gang members could draw on faith-based practitioners' expertise, who could assist ambivalent or exiting members, (who are inclined toward spirituality and religion) in linking them to religious communities "that are unconditionally willing to accept them and that can eventually serve as a new reference group for defining their new identity" (Berger et al., 2017, p. 499).

Findings from empirical research on the process of desistance identified that geographical and social location plays a key role in shaping involvement in delinquency. According to Farrall et al. (2014), Goffman (1963), and Meisenhelder (1977), environments matter because they create individuals' routines, which in turn, communicate what activities they engage in, and consequently cue, who they are or strive to become. In this study, participants identified that their social settings had powerful influence over them, generating feelings of entrapment in the gang life. Consequently, to free themselves from connections with antisocial and criminal peers and activities, they made the conclusive decision to relocate.

The interventions that support the exit process can reduce the sense of entrapment in the criminal gang lifestyle caused by serious repercussions that can accompany the event of gang exit. For instance, similarly to the Women's Refuge model (Crichton-Hill, 2010), social workers could assist with relocation and help exiters and their family members connect with other community-based social services to free them from the criminal gang's social and financial grip. This type of support can minimise the risk associated with the walk-out process and encourage exiters to start fresh, establish healthier routines, and increase their commitment to a gang free lifestyle. Initiatives facilitating linkages to prosocial institutions can also help reduce immediate psychological consequences of exit such as alienation and disconnection.

One of the significant findings of this study refuted prior research conclusions on employment prompting immediate gang exit. However, this study found that meaningful and

more importantly better paying jobs played a crucial role in scaffolding the desistance maintenance process. This and other implications relevant to various stages of desistance maintenance continuum is addressed in the following section.

Desistance Phase: Supporting Desistance Maintenance and Stigma Management

Although prior research tends to frame desistance as a single event that occurs at the time of the formal gang exit (Laub & Sampson, 1993), Maruna (2001) contests this view and proposes that desistance is a long-term, ongoing process that requires desisters to draw on skills distinct from those utilised in the exit process. Despite Maruna making this observation over two decades ago, empirical research to test and elaborate on his claim remains limited. For instance, Berger et al. (2017), Lee and Bubolz (2020), Nugent and Schinkel (2016), and Rosen and Cruz (2018) provide some insight into the way gang free lifestyle is maintained, but their findings highlight only the broad elements of what is ultimately a far more complex and nuanced process. The key findings of this study, on the one hand, underpin Maruna's proposition but, on the other, they extend it.

The study's findings align with the conclusion of Berger et al. (2017) and Nugent and Schinkel (2016), who argue that in the early stages of desistance, exiters often face adversities such as a sense of alienation and rejection in the conventional society, and self-doubts about what they *"can do as a human being"* (Taki). These negative experiences can push desisters back into the gangs in pursuit for acceptance, purpose, and financial stability. Hence, as outlined previously intervention programmes targeting ambivalent gang members should be actively working on linking them to prosocial institutions. Employment based initiatives should consider the criticality of job availability and quality. For example, social workers could assess desisters' employment skills and refer them to agencies where they could work and generate income. If desisters lack marketable skills, social workers could assist them with educational opportunities, thereby increasing their long-term employability and social integration.

This study's participants' identified that in the initial stages of their desistance phase, they received support primarily from their immediate whānau. This could be supplemented by structured models such as the Circle of Support and Accountability (CoSA), which has been successfully utilised for sexual offenders (Lowe & Willis, 2019, 2020; Lowe, 2017). As the literature on stigma demonstrates, the more connected a stigmatised individual feels, the more affirmed they become in their transformation. Therefore, a similar intervention could support exiters in navigating societal resources.

Although CoSA would largely be made up of volunteers, including ex-gang members or ex-prisoners who wish to work alongside and support others who are less far along in their desistance journey, the programme itself could be organised and coordinated by social workers or reformed ex-gang members and overseen by a parent community organisation (Wilson & Prinzo, 2001). This implies that social sector agencies intending to establish such intervention must allocate time and resources for their social worker and volunteers to efficiently run this programme. Policy makers who are concerned with reducing gang membership rates in ANZ should consider creating and designating a pool of funding to support agencies to adequately set up and resource this model of intervention.

The resources could also cover the cost of training CoSA volunteers, including former members in transformative and relational social work practices. Additionally, transformed gang members could partake in programmes like the Public Safety Initiative of LIFERS, Inc. (Harris, 2009). This initiative could provide desisters professional guidance on effectively managing vestiges of criminal gang characteristics, such as violent problem solution style, conduct, and appearance. As participants identified in this study, learning to control impulsive responses to perceived or actual judgement, alongside adopting refined communication and presentation skills, was a frequently utilised strategy to retain employment and manage relationships. These changes led to accumulation of social, human, and social capital.

The primary purpose of CoSA would be to provide exiters with a non-judgemental and supportive environment, where they trust-based relationships leading to deep respect between workers and the client could be established. This would create opportunities for desisters to experience safe spaces, where they could openly discuss frustrations, fears, and traumatising events without needing to rely on reactive stigma management strategies or "test the waters" before engagement (Siegel et al., 1998, p. 14). Building on key elements of transformative and relational social work practice, these support groups could encourage the desisters to actively engage in determining how services is delivered to them (Munford & Sanders, 2021).

Another key finding of this study was that during desistance participants became deeply concerned with strengthening their ties within the conventional community. However, participants frequently encountered difficulties in reconciling relationships with extended whānau, who had distanced themselves due to the participants' prior gang involvement. This highlights the importance of including whānau workers (could be designated members of CoSA) who by taking into account the clients' and their wider family groups' cultural and social practices could directly support and provide opportunities for the restoration of familial relationships. These support workers through facilitated meetings between gang exiters and estranged immediate or extended families could generate a dialogue about relationship building. Reconciliation and reintegration into family networks could increase emotional grounding, a sense of accountability, and belonging.

In addition to familial reconnections, participants also emphasised the salience of engaging with institutions that they historically had "poor to hostile relationships with", because those were seen as part of the "system" (Tamatea, 2018, p. 69). These included social service providers, community organisations, and justice-related agencies. (Re)connecting with these institutions were vital for participants' desistance maintenance, because through these relationships they were able to demonstrate consistent and prosocial behaviour, receive

validation for transformational efforts, and access tangible support, such as character references, employment pathways, or mentorship opportunities (Dunbar, 2018; Maruna, 2011; Meisenhelder, 1982). Hence, alongside facilitating meetings with members in the family networks, intervention programmes should utilise transformative social work practice, which focuses on "challenging deficit thinking, stigma, discrimination, and exclusion" (Munford, 2023, p. 367). Therefore, linking desisters with key institutions such as social control agencies, sport clubs, and faith-based organisations, which are capable of providing practical resources and symbolic certification for authentic transformation could reduce desistance frustration and help desisters recognise their "socially valued identities" (Tew, 2013, p. 363).

This leads to the final implication of the study's findings: the potential role of public reintegration ceremonies in strengthening commitment to desistance maintenance. Participants suggested sharing their experiences before respectable audiences like university students, police officers, or community leaders was a powerful experience from which they gained symbolic affirmation of their reform. Specifically designed platforms where desisters can publicly announce and discuss their transformation efforts could therefore be highly beneficial for gang desistance purposes by facilitating broader social recognition and certification of authentic transformation (Decker et al., 2014). Social workers, who actively support exiters might consider facilitating and encouraging exiters to participate in such public events.

Participating in such presentations may have a bidirectional purpose: first, desisters can demonstrate their authentic transformation and challenge and dismantle persistent stereotypes such as the notion that "once a gang member always a gang member" (Lee & Bubolz, 2020, p. 77). Second, such experiences can generate recognition and lead to the obtainment of acceptance across wider social arenas. As a result, reintegration ceremonies may bring desisters closer and foster engagement with social groups that they perceived to be hard to engage with.

The central implication of this study's findings echoes the conclusions of stigma literature. It consistently demonstrates that rather than relying on methods rooted in segregation, rejection, and marginalisation**,** stigmatised individuals' reintegration is best supported through inclusion, open dialogue, and avenues for demonstrating transformative efforts. A similar inclusive strategy could be more effective in curbing rising gang membership in ANZ, than the currently preferred suppressive and exclusionary policies, such as the proposed young serious offender bill and NGL registration (Ministry of Children-Oranga Tamariki, n.d.; New Zealand Government-Te Kāwanatanga o Aotearoa, 2024), which may inadvertently reinforce gang affiliation by deepening individuals' disconnection from mainstream society and driving them further into criminal networks.

Thus, the study's findings suggests that policymakers, service providers, and professionals should reflect on whether they are the experts on the lived experience of others and engage meaningfully with individuals who have exited the gang life and provide resources to build emotional support and understanding of the wider issues that impede on their everyday lives (Munford, 2023; Munford & Sanders, 2021). These individuals having spent time in gang, are vastly different from a non-member, as the latter has never internalised the group's norms, practices, or formed deep relationships and shared experiences with other group members (Ebaugh, 1988). Consequently, those who have "been there and … done that" (Radak, 2016, p. 128) possess unique insights into what works in practice when it comes to prevention, disengagement, and sustaining desistance (Gormally, 2015). Indeed, reformed gang members' voices can provide valuable knowledge for shaping responsive, targeted, and multisystemic interventions for gang desistance maintenance, such as the Oranga Rangatahi programme that is an effective prevention tool.

By combining symbolic interactionism, stigma, role exit, and cognitive transformation theories into a comprehensive framework, the theoretical model was central to analysing the

processes of gang desistance and stigma navigation, as well as generating the study's findings and their practical implications. The following section discusses key features of this integrated framework and their potential to advance future research on gang desistance maintenance and understanding how stigma shapes behaviour among other marginalised populations.

Implications of the Theoretical Framework

The study's theoretical framework grounded in symbolic interactionism, labelling, role exit, and cognitive transformation theories offers a novel approach that might be a useful for social work and broader social sciences concerned with individuals exiting delinquent or otherwise stigmatised roles. In this study, symbolic interaction that focuses on social interactions and their effects on individuals' social roles and involvement in reference groups, laid the theoretical foundation for understanding the evolving nature of identity change (Blumer, 1986; Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1913). Central to this study's findings is the observation that gang entry, disengagement, and desistance are not one-off events but distinct and dynamic processes, which, triggered by ongoing social interactions, produce identity transformation. Participants' narratives revealed that these processes were not only articulated through their behavioural shifts but also through continual performance of their new identities within their given social contexts, whether it be the gang or the conventional environments.

Moreover, participants' accounts underscored the importance of social groups as spaces, where social interactions in the form of recognition and validation shaped and scaffolded the construction of role identities (Matsueda & Heimer, 1997; Mead, 1934; Stryker & Serpe, 1982). These interactional and relational processes specific to social and cultural contexts reflect the central tenets of symbolic interactionism. As a result symbolic interactionist perspectives are frequently applied in international gang entry and desistance literature (Decker et al., 2013; Maruna, 2001; Maruna & Farrall, 2004; Matsueda & Leverso, 2019; McNeill,

2014, 2016; Nugent & Schinkel, 2016). In some instances, though, these concepts are framed as social identity or identity theories (Burke & Reitzes, 1991; Lee & Bubolz, 2024).

However, national social work and criminology scholarship has paid little attention to symbolic interactionism and its related theoretical strands. More explicit engagement with this approach could benefit local social sciences. As it can cast light on how reciprocal relationships in wider social arenas spark a desire to belong to a particular reference group, fostering the development of role identities that eventually crystallise into a sense of self. Alongside or integrated with indigenous approaches, such a perspective could deepen the understanding of how ANZ's history of colonisation, marginalisation, and systemic inequality have contributed to the formation of criminal and resistant group identities, a phenomenon that has been particularly prevalent amongst Māori population (Kisby, 2019).

The symbolic interactionism's centrality in providing a structured explanation of how social responses form identity underpins its connection to the selected conceptual theories such as the labelling, role exit, and cognitive transformation. Labelling theory foregrounds social reactions and constrains placed on individuals, which can lead to immersion in delinquent roles, development of a corresponding salient identity, and adoption of strategies to manage labels attached to these roles (Becker, 1963; Goffman 1963; Link at al., 1989; Schneider & Conrad, 1980; Siegel et al., 1998). Role exit theory outlines the transitional social phases, through which individuals disengage from entrenched and stigmatised social roles (Berger et al., 2017; Decker et al., 2014; Dziewanski, 2020; Ebaugh, 1989). Additionally, cognitive transformation theory accounts for internal shifts in the self-concept that, shaped by social stimuli, occur throughout the processes of role entry and disengagement (Giordano et al., 2002).

Although each theory brings its own distinctive perspective, they complement each other because they address the trajectory of formation and dissolution of delinquent identity associated with the gang member role. In addition, they bring attention to the structural and

subjective factors that initiate and influence these identity transformations. Thus, the amalgamation of symbolic interactionism, labelling, role exit, and cognitive transformation theories into a unified conceptual framework provided a comprehensive analytical lens for examining the bidirectional exchanges between societal structures and participants' identity processes across their gang-centric lifestyle.

More importantly, the key contribution of this combined framework is that it conceptualises gang desistance maintenance as an ongoing dynamic process. For example, in the initial phase of gang desistance, despite being cognitively prepared (as suggested by cognitive transformation theory), participants did not immediately secure and transition into prosocial roles (as explained by the role exit theory), primarily due to the anticipated or enacted social stigma (as outlined in labelling theories). Only in later phases, when prosocial roles were assumed, the gradual accrual of social validation enhanced participants' self-perceptions, which in turn elicited the use of more proactive stigma management strategies and increased their commitment to gang desistance maintenance. By illuminating these processes, this conceptual framework, foregrounded by symbolic interactionism, brings into focus the constantly evolving push-pull interplay between individuals' readiness for change and social barriers that arise from social responses to delinquent role exiters.

In this light, while the combination of the conceptual theories helped define the study's analytical boundaries, IPA elevated the framework into an interpretive tool by illustrating how participants negotiated and constructed their identities within their given social contexts over time. Although seldom applied in the examination of gang disengagement (Bolger & Needs, 2021; Healy, 2014), let alone in studying the gang desistance maintenance process, IPA played a critical role in this study by illuminating how key theoretical dimensions corresponded with participants' lived realities. IPA's idiographic and hermeneutic focus enabled a detailed and inductive examination of how participants made sense of their transformative journeys across

the three gang-centric life phases (Smith et al., 2009; Smith et al., 1995; Smith & Shinebourne, 2012; Smith & Osborn, 2008). This course comprised of navigating stigma, transitioning into roles, and interpreting and adopting new identities. IPA's close attention to subjective meaning-making generated nuanced insights not only into the phenomena of stigma experiences, role change, and cognitive transformation, but also into how participants' first enculturated gang and later, conventional practices via social interactions (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Given the theoretical framework's ability (including IPA) to bridge structural, relational, and personal levels of analysis, it is highly likely to be suitable for investigating other cohorts, such as people experiencing homelessness or former convicts, who transition out of stigmatised roles, face public labelling, and negotiate fractured social relationships. In this context, this framework can help social workers recognise the importance of clients' identity work and their need for social validation in the midst of navigating the complexities of disengaging from stigmatised roles. For criminology and related social sciences concerned with marginalised populations, this framework provides an integrated approach to interpreting how macro-level structures and subjective meaning-making processes directly interact to shape individuals' interpretation of systemic exclusion and the strategies they adopt to overcome these challenges. By developing this framework, the study contributes a theoretical model, informed by participants' lived experiences, that can enhance understanding of identity transformation as it unfolds across a range of stigmatised roles.

Conclusion

The discussion of the existing literature alongside this study's findings highlighted key areas of agreement as well as areas of contention. These parallels and divergences between the findings and the broader discourse on gang entry, disengagement, and desistance formed the basis of the study's original contribution to the scholarly field, and directly addressed the four

research questions. While the first two questions were considered individually, the third and fourth questions were addressed together due to their inherent interconnection. The discussion of key findings' implications was structured around the three identified life phases and explored how the findings could inform and extend existing prevention and reintegration programmes, strategic gang intervention measures, and the application of transformative social work practice principles in practice. The integrated theoretical framework offered a model that can be utilised in future studies not only examining stigma experiences of former gang members but also other marginalised populations. Drawing on the findings' and theoretical framework's implications and the study's limitations, the following chapter, after offering a review of the preceding chapters, presents recommendations for future study designs, interventions, and policy reconsiderations.

Chapter Nine

Conclusion and Recommendations

This concluding chapter offers an overview of the project's research questions and objectives, theoretical framework, methodology, key findings and learnings and their broader implications. This review discusses the relevance of the findings to other areas of social work areas and draws attention to the study's limitations. Prior to concluding with my personal reflections, this chapter proposes recommendations for future study designs to advance the understanding of gang desistance, as well as interventions and policies aimed at preventing gang entry, supporting gang disengagement, and sustaining gang desistance.

Review of the Research Process

As outlined in Chapter One (p. 4), my interest in exploring how criminal gang members exit gangs and assume a prosocial role originated from previous study (Radak, 2016). This earlier work drew my attention to the notable gap in research on the process that takes place beyond the event of gang exit, particularly, the skills and strategies required to sustain desistance. To investigate this under-researched area and advance the knowledge base of extant gang disengagement and desistance literature, I designed this research project to examine the relationships between gang desistance and stigma management. This study aimed to initiate a dialogue on how stigma hinders gang desistance progression and what stigma management methods desisting members employ to navigate the challenges of reintegration and to accomplish conventional goals. These objectives also sought to cast light on why desistance sometimes fails and takes a zig-zag path between conventional and gang worlds before it is fully accomplished. To address these objectives, four research questions were proposed:

1. What experiences of stigma do desisting gang members have?
2. How do experiences of stigma impact on desisting gang members' emerging former gang member identity development?
3. How do desisting gang members protect their emerging desired identity in the face of adversity?
4. How does the emerging former gang member identity contribute to the changes in the desisting gang member's social networks?

To explore these questions, I conducted face-to-face, semi-structured individual interviews with 26 former criminal gang members (please find further information on final participant group in Chapter Four, pp. 109-111), who shared detailed accounts of their gang-centric life experiences. Their data rich narratives provided the foundation for the detailed findings presented in this doctoral dissertation. My analysis of the participants' life course accounts were shaped by the relevant extant literature and the study's theoretical framework, which drew on the symbolic interactionist perspectives (Blumer, 1986; Cooley, 1902; Matsueda & Heimer, 1997), and integrated labelling (Link et al., 1989; Matsueda, 2014; Paternoster & Iovanni, 1989), Ebaugh's (1988) role exit, Giordano et al.'s (2002) cognitive transformation concepts.

This conceptual framework was a central ingredient for the study's analytical lens and guided the interpretive phenomenological six step analysis of data. Through the conceptual framework the analytical approach illuminated key life course patterns, the journey into gang member identity, the gang disengagement, and the criminal gang desistance maintenance phases. These three distinguishable life phases are presented in Chapters Five, Six, and Seven.

A Brief Overview of the Findings

Chapter Five includes those emerging patterns from the data analysis that illustrates participants' gang member identity development. Themes in this chapter suggest that their gang involvement was not only incepted by the experience of adversities in their familial settings such as being brought up in single parent households, parental maltreatment (physical and verbal abuse and neglect), unrealistic expectations and parental gang affiliation, but also by the exposure to spatial risk factors namely schools, neighbourhoods, and prisons. Their social interaction within these milieus led participants to adopt delinquent behaviours, which in turn often further alienated them from prosocial peer groups and family members. As a result of feeling rejected from conventional social bands and perceiving gangs as an alternative peer group, where a sense of acceptance, belonging, protection, and financial gain could be attained, participants' glorification of the gang lifestyle increasingly grew.

Upon entering the gang, participants immersed themselves in its culture. Their high-rate and frequent association with other members eroded their remaining prosocial relations and anchored their gang member self-perception. Participants communicated their internalised gang identity through a range of means including modified appearance, increased reliance on reactive conflict solution strategies, and anticipation of long-term or life-long affiliation.

Chapter Six outlines participants' staged gang disengagement process. This chapter highlights that participants' ongoing negative experiences associated with the criminal gang life, like disillusionment in the gang dynamics, incarceration, and a change in personal circumstances (family and health) sparked questions about ongoing membership maintenance. Although these early doubts did not exert enough influence to trigger a sudden gang exit, they were sufficient to initiate oscillation between the gang and non-gang worlds. Participants' identified three pivotal experiences such as fatherhood, religious evocation, and relocation as crucial factors in resolving their ambivalence and internal conflict about leaving the gang.

These events became critical turning points in their gang-centric life course, because they produced a shift in values, identity, and long-term goals. The immediate consequences of participants' gang exit included the walk-out process, verbal threats, other members' scepticism, and destabilised financial and psychological state.

Chapter Seven explores participants' experiences after formally exiting the gang exit and arranges them along the continuum of gang desistance maintenance. The early stage of this spectrum demonstrates participants' initial adversities and self-doubts, which propelled them to contemplate or actively reengage with the gang for financial or social support. This gradual relapse was often deterred by immediate family members' encouragement, former associates' dissuasion, and access to desired conventional goals facilitated through reactive stigma management strategies, namely secrecy or concealment.

The obtainment of meaningful and constructive goals marked the beginning of participants' reintegration into the conventional society. The reconciliation of strained relationships with extended family members, (re)connection with social control agencies, and engagement with support networks, including former associates, offered participants the opportunity of receiving external recognition and validation for their transformational efforts. Additionally, participants cued their internal shifts toward authentic reform through refined demeanour and appearance, effective management of a residual gang member identity, and the adoption of less reactive stigma management strategies, such as selective disclosure.

Participants, who felt relieved from the stressors of desistance, openly and effectively managed remaining gang ties, and found positives in their former gang status identified as desisters. These participants engaged in public events where they proclaimed their desistance efforts. These forums functioned as reintegration ceremonies, because participants received recognition for their transformation in wider social arenas. In addition to this proactive stigma management, participants at more advanced stages of the desistance continuum utilised pre-

emptive disclosure to control the flow of personal information and challenge stereotypes held about reformed gang members. Moreover, participants' nuanced understanding of why certain segments of society continued to perceive and treat them as active criminal gang members suggested a deeper level of desistance.

The discussion of consistencies and divergences between these findings and the local and the international literature offered new insights into the processes of gang disengagement and gang desistance. The following section reviews these key learnings and their relevance to the research questions and also briefly outlines their implications.

Key Learnings and Implications

Largely consistent with the national and international literature, particularly, Lemert's (1951, 1972) social reaction theory and Link et al.'s (1989) modified labelling theory, the study found that adverse familial conditions were central for the development of delinquent and socially objectionable behaviours. As these conducts were intolerable in prosocial peer groups, participants felt rejected in these social settings and gravitated towards gangs. Underscoring Melde and Esbensen's (2011) observation, the study identified that participants' gang entry functioned as a turning point in their life course because the gang's "social suctioning effect" drove them to immerse themselves in its norms and practices, modify their physical appearance, adjust their conduct that align with gang identity, and envision long-term affiliation (Moule et al., 2013, p. 153). Consistent with Goffman's (1963) concept of triple stigmatisation, participants' overt display of internalised gang identity generated further marginalisation in the conventional society. These findings directly addressed the first research question: What experiences of stigma do desisting gang members have?

This study findings underscored the steps identified in Ebaugh's (1988) role exit and Giordano et al.'s (2002) cognitive transformation models. The negative experiences associated

with the gang life produced participants' hesitancy about remaining in the gang and a period of oscillation between the gang and non-gang worlds. However, in contrast to prior research conclusions by Uggen (2000) and Laub and Sampson (1993), this study did not find employment as a primary driver of gang exit. Instead, it identified three critical moments such as fatherhood, religious awakening, and relocation as key catalysts in prompting gang disengagement. Meanwhile, meaningful employment or other vocations were found to be instrumental in sustaining desistance. Moreover, advancing the scholarly debate on the immediate aftermath of the gang exit (Dunbar, 2018; Fleisher & Decker, 2001; Tamatea, 2018), the study found that participants encountered a range of consequences, spanning from the walk-out process to psychological impacts. Participants' gang disengagement experiences provided responses to the second research question: How does experiences of stigma impact on desisting gang members' emerging former gang member identity development?

As prior research has left the nuanced and complex process that occurs beyond the event of gang exit largely underexplored (Berger et al., 2017; Maruna, 2001; Nugent & Schinkel, 2016), this study focused on how participants managed to maintain gang free lifestyle. The use of stigma studies, such as Goffman (1963), Schneider and Conrad (1980), and Siegele at al. (1998) informed the analysis. These helped to illustrate how participants navigated desistance challenges, responded to perceived or socially enacted stigma, achieved conventional goals, formed relationships with prosocial groups, and altered their appearance and conduct to align with conventional expectations. Integrating the concepts of stigma and criminal gang desistance enabled the identification of desistance as a continuously evolving and dynamic process, consisting of three interrelated stages: initial, reintegration, and desister. This recognition informed the conceptualisation of desistance maintenance as a continuum.

The conclusions drawn from these findings informed the first and second research questions and provided insight into the third and fourth research questions: How do desisting

gang members protect their emerging desired identity in the face of adversity? How does the emerging former gang member identity contribute to the changes in the desisting gang member's social networks?

Moreover, the key findings carry significant implications for policy development, particularly in relation to multi-agency prevention and intervention efforts, allocating additional resources to service providers and social workers, and integrating reformed gang members into the design and delivery of effective gang prevention and desistance maintenance initiatives. Collectively, these findings represent the study's original significant contribution to social work practice both in the ANZ and internationally, as well as to the broader social science scholarship. The next section explores how these findings along with the theoretical framework inform other areas of social work practice concerned with assisting stigmatised populations.

The Study's Adaptability or Contributions to Other Social Work Fields

The significance of the desistance continuum concept is in its detailed and nuanced portrayal of how, across the three stages, criminal gang members manage and overcome desistance related frustration, achieve desired conventional goals (such as employment and education), reinsert into the wider social webs, and adopt a desister identity using various stigma management strategies. Building on this, these key findings provide a valuable insight into the authentic transformation of desisted criminal gang members.

Illuminating this transformational process (scaffolded by stigma coping methods) is important, because it can also be interpreted and applied to other areas of social work inquiry focused on other stigmatised populations. Indeed, considering the findings in a broader dimension, as noted in Chapter Two, under the theme of Coping Skills (pp. 49-51), many parallels exist between the reintegration experience of non-gang affiliated ex-convicts and former criminal gang members. Individuals from both groups often carry indelible markers of

time spent in institutions like prison, criminal gangs, or both (Moran, 2012). These conspicuous labels may instantly assign them a status of being "less than the average citizen" (Uggen et al., 2004, p. 288) in the conventional society, where such labels continue to signal a former occupation of morally discredited roles.

Moreover, what Travis (2003, p. 16) terms "invisible punishment" is equally detrimental as criminal conviction or being listed on the NGL can permanently tarnish personal reputations, sanction rights and privileges of citizenship, and expose individuals to ongoing informal social exclusion (Brew et al., 2022; Gunn et al., 2018; LeBel, 2012). Unsurprisingly, NGL registration or a permanent criminal record may prompt "ex-convicts … [to be] more cautious about revealing their status", particularly in contexts such as employment or housing applications, "where this information risks exclusion" (Winnick & Bodkin, 2008, p. 302).

Homelessness and former criminal gang membership also share many overlapping characteristics. Similarly to criminal gangs, homeless groups may offer companionship, protection, and social support to individuals without stable housing (Yoder et al., 2003). Further, both desisting criminal gang members and homeless individuals frequently anticipate or perceive stigma in the broader social arena when seeking to authenticate their transformation or to access support services (Desjarlais-deKlerk, 2018; Wen et al., 2007).

Given these intersecting properties, the study's insight into the progressive nature of role and identity transformation may provide a pragmatic foundation for developing policies and services aimed at easing the initial frustration associated with transitioning into a socially accepted role. However, prior to offering recommendations for future research topics and innovative and practical solutions for supporting desisted criminal gang members, the following section offers reflections on the study's limitations.

Limitations

While the key findings brought new knowledge about the criminal gang desistance to light, the flexible qualitative design and interpretive phenomenological analysis, which typically works best in new and complex research areas (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012), presented with limitations. Some of these shortcomings stemmed from the participant recruitment criteria. Although the criteria were designed to be ethnically inclusive, the exclusion of non-English speakers, may have inadvertently omitted valuable insights into how desistance is maintained within ethnicity, or race based gangs. For example, former members of groups like the Chinese 14K Triad in ANZ may encounter even greater challenges integrating into ANZ conventional society. Cultural differences, language barriers, and limited availability of significant social support in the host country may further complicate the management of stigma targeting former gang members.

Excluding women, due to their subordinate role in the traditional gang structure, also limited the study's insights into gang disengagement and desistance maintenance. Another limitation arose from the participant selection criteria, which exclusively targeted reformed criminal gang members who worked or volunteered in social or religious sectors or were students in helping professions or religious leadership training courses.

Due to the confines of the prescribed scope and time, the findings only represent a snapshot of participants' retrospective recollections up to the point of their interviews, rendering the research to a cross-sectional design. Additionally, investigating how conspicuous gang tattoos or self-labelling may have hindered participants' transformation efforts lay beyond the study's limits.

Given the high rates of Māori involvement in gangs, it was anticipated that the study would attract several participants who identified as Māori. However, it was unexpected that 23 of 26 participants whakapapa to Māori. Despite this high proportion of Māori participants,

limited information emerged from the data regarding how cultural perspectives influenced, frustrated, or facilitated participants' gang exit and gang desistance processes. Consequently, the limited exploration cultural significance in respect to the gang exit and desistance processes adds another limitation to this study.

Finally, the strict ethical boundaries also created limitations for this study. During the data gathering phase, adherence to Te Tiriti o Waitangi and Māori Tikanga principles contributed to participants recognising my research efforts being tika and pono. As a result, they invited me to attend a three-day religious gathering, church service, and a publicly open gang assembly that were facilitated by them or other reformed gang members. Although invitation to attend these meetings emerged from the formal data collection exercises, the study's ethical obligations restricted the extent to which observation of participants in their helping roles could be incorporated into the findings and discussion.

These limitations form the foundation for recommendations for future research directions. Additionally, Implications of the Findings and the Theoretical Framework detailed in Chapter Eight (pp. 267-284) also generate a series of recommendation. The next section addresses these recommendations, beginning with future research informed by the implications of the theoretical framework, followed by those comport with findings' implications.

Recommendations

In line with the limitations outlined in the previous section and the theoretical framework implications identified in the previous chapter (pp. 281-284), I recommend that future research adopts a longitudinal approach combined with the ethnographic methodology. Ethnography has been successfully employed by several gang scholars (Eggleston, 1997; Faleolo, 2014; Gilbert, 2010; Thrasher, 1927; Vigil, 2005) and as a method aligns well with the symbolic interactionist epistemology, as it seeks to understand how biographies and lived experiences

are structured and imbued with meaning through social interactions (Denzin, 2004). Moreover, ethnographic inquiry and tailored ethical considerations would allow personal observations in participants' natural environments. For example, this methodological and ethical design could provide further understanding on how, in their helping roles, reformed criminal gang members interact, influence, and support their clients.

With substantial time on hand, researchers could also build stronger rapport and trust with participants, enabling the collection of more intimate elements of life-stories and deeper insights into the day-to-day experiences of a desisting criminal gang member. Conducting longer-term and more in-depth exploration of gang desistance maintenance would likely enhance the quality of gathered data. In turn, this could lead to a more sophisticated and comprehensive understanding of the nuanced interactions between external events and individuals' decision-making processes that pilot and sustain desistance.

I also recommend setting up future quantitative research, guided by the draft questionnaire provided in Appendix J. These projects could broaden the selection criteria to include a larger and more gender, and linguistically diverse sample of former gang members with a particular focus on those who have pursued careers outside helping or faith-based sectors. Future quantitative studies employing similar theoretical perspectives could examine whether these former members share comparable desistance experiences and adopt management strategies like those participated in this study. Expanding participants criteria could enhance generalisability and transferability of the findings on desistance maintenance.

Given the novelty of the study's topic and conceptual framework, I recommend that future research rather than applying IPA, should analyse the collected data using the grounded theory method. Prior gang desistance research, such as the work of Berger et al. (2017), Carson (2018), and Lee and Bubolz (2020), has employed this analytical method to generate hypotheses or new conceptualisations of gang disengagement. Grounded theory also aligns

well with symbolic interactionist approaches and qualitative study designs because it avoids imposing pre-existing theoretical frameworks. As Berger et al. (2017, p. 490) note this "bottom-up approach" enables the researchers to generate "hypotheses grounded in the reality of the study's participants as well as … to construct a theory based on their experiences." Grounded theory approach, therefore, has the potential to advance the theoretical understanding of gang desistance maintenance, given the existing substantial gap in ontological and empirical research surrounding this topic.

While the research attracted a high proportion of Māori participants, it yielded limited information regarding how religious and cultural perspectives influenced the gang centric life phases. I, therefore, recommend that future studies utilise the Kaupapa Māori approach to examine how the ongoing effects of colonisation, stereotyping, and marginalisation have contributed to high representation of Māori in ANZ gangs.

Additionally, the Kaupapa Māori approach could underpin further research in exploring how the reconnection with Te Ao Māori (Māori world view) and the development of cultural and religious identity may support and strengthen Māori gang members' gang exit and desistance processes. Such research could also explore how Māori individuals negotiate and maintain their close kinship and whanau connections within gangs, while attempting to disengage from the gang and its associated social networks.

Gaining a deeper understanding of how Māori gang members develop religious and cultural identities during their attempts to exit gangs could provide valuable insights for the development of future policies. Based on the findings of such research, policymakers could consider implementing new and extending existing indigenous programmes where cultural and religious leaders assume a greater role in guiding and supporting the reintegration of Māori former gang members into mainstream society.

In relation to the implications of the study's findings, I recommend that the Oranga Tamariki driven Oranga Rangatahi programme or similar multi-systemic prevention programme, integrate cultural elements and be rolled out nationwide to support at-risk youth and their families in avoiding gang involvement and entry[61]. Furthermore, I recommend policy initiatives that allocate funding for service providers to establish intensive mentoring programmes capable of ensuring consistent and high-rate engagement with at-risk youth, including school attendance, after school activities, and weekend programmes.

Furthermore, I recommend that social justice institutions, service providers (government and non-government) and social agents shift their primary focus from achieving active gang members' true desistance to targeting gradually decreasing antisocial and criminal behaviour. Thus, I recommend the establishment of a similar multi-agency intervention programme to Oranga Rangatahi in the adult space. For such interventions to occur, policy makers should consider allocating resources and funding for service providers to offer long-term programmes that integrate cultural and religious elements.

I recommend that government agencies allocate adequate resources to service providers for the purpose of establishing support initiatives modelled on the principles of Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA). Social agents could utilise transformative and relational social work approach to assist desisting clients to navigate stigma across employment settings and social networks. This may include, helping clients reframe their past experiences in ways that highlight their merits on loyalty, resilience, and leadership skills. Recognising the value of lived experiences, service providers may directly or indirectly incorporate desisting client's insights and competencies to engage more effectively with hard-to-reach communities. Such involvement would not only enhance the quality of the agency's service provision but also

[61]Although I understand, at the time of finalising this thesis, further Oranga Rangatahi programmes have been established nationwide.

reinforce desisting clients' emerging prosocial identities and foster their aspiration to meaningfully contribute and potentially pursue a role in helping or faith-based sectors. Additionally, I recommend the inclusion of former gang members in community education initiatives, which are centred around transformational journeys. These public forums can affirm desisters' reformed identities, promote greater public understanding of desistance process, and facilitate enhanced social reintegration.

I recommend that certain policies and structures designed to curb gang membership rates be reconsidered. For instance, if registries like the NGL are to remain in use, they should be updated frequently and accurately with input from gang insiders and not be exploited for political gains. Individuals, who have demonstrated authentic transformation, validated by recognised members of the conventional community (social control agencies, educational institutions, and faith-based organisations), should have their names removed from the list, regardless of any residual links to their former gang.

I also recommend that policymakers re-evaluate the application of the serious young offender label. This early designation could produce ongoing social exclusion and knife off future opportunities. As such labelling may result in external barriers to forming connections with prosocial institutions, securing employment, and achieving genuine transformation. It may also cause internal challenges including diminished self-concept, overreliance on reactive stigma management strategies, and relapse into criminal activities.

Similarly, I recommend that policymakers review the gang patch ban in the Gangs Act (2024) (New Zealand Government-Te Kāwanatanga o Aotearoa, 2024), because it may carry more serious long-term consequences than benefits. In response to such restrictions, active members may be more inclined to adopt conspicuous and permanent markers of gang affiliation, such as facial tattoos. These highly visible symbols further complicate disengagement and desistance efforts, and their removal can be costly and time consuming.

Having reviewed the research process, theoretical foundation, objectives, research questions, findings, key learnings, and outlined the findings' adaptability, the study's limitations and recommendations, this thesis is nearing its conclusion. Before closing, though, the final section of this chapter, and of the thesis, presents my personal reflections.

Concluding Thoughts and Reflections

By reflecting on my PhD journey, I realise the genesis of this research reaches back to the unanswered questions that lingered from earlier stages of academic and professional life. As I mentioned in Chapter One (pp. 4-6), it all started with the inspiration I drew from my late mentor and my dear friend, Ms Mary McGrath. Her compassionate work with the homeless and other marginalised people triggered my interest to understand how social structures construct individuals' everyday lives. Her influence helped tune my critical thinking and encouraged me to explore a range of social work roles, through which, I met transformed criminal gang members. Their journeys captured my attention and sparked my curiosity to investigate the complex nature of gang desistance.

I must admit when I embarked on this PhD journey, I was somewhat naïve, or rather overly confident. I anticipated that the research would present some challenging moments, but I expected the process would generally be smoother. I felt reassured that I could easily refresh and build upon my knowledge of gang desistance theories and concepts. I also assumed that refamiliarising myself with the literature and adjusting to academic demands would not take long. Similarly, I was optimistic that recruiting participants and gathering data would proceed without challenges, given my relationships I intended to rekindle and my social work networks I planned to tap into.

However, early in my journey, I came to realise the truth in Berger's (1963, p. 34) words that "things are not what they seem", especially when one attends to the demands of a PhD

programme. Each phase of the process, whether it was the preparation for the ethics application, navigation of the confirmation event, recruitment of participants, data analysis, or writing the chapters presented unexpected complications. These processes, I had initially assumed would be straightforward, proved to be more complex and time consuming that I had anticipated.

When I reflect on the highs and lows of my PhD journey, I find myself wondering whether individuals leaving a criminal gang also anticipate a less arduous process of reintegration into conventional society at the point of exit (an area that could be further explored in a future project). While this is unknown, the majority of existing literature seems to imply that reintegration beyond the event of gang exit is a relatively seamless process.

Although some empirical studies have examined the interplay between external and internal factors, which can set in motion, hinder, precipitate, or complete the process of gang disengagement, since Maruna's (2001) seminal description of desistance as an ongoing journey, a considerable gap remains in the literature regarding how desistance is sustained over time. This study sought to address this gap, by exploring desisters' maintenance of a gang free lifestyle "in the face of life's obstacles and frustrations – that is, when "everything builds up" or one receives "some slap in the face"" (Maruna, 2001, p. 26). The findings contributed to this underexplored area, because they revealed that ANZ gang desisters can effectively navigate social stigma and frustration to reconstruct their tainted personal characteristics and to make it "easier believe in what [they] can do as a human being" (Taki).

Gadamer (1998) describes this as a fusion of horizons, through which I have not only challenged my own presuppositions but also hope to help revise societal prejudices and biases toward former gang members. Although this study has contributed to the dialogue between international and local research and ANZ former criminal gang member's lived experiences, much remains to be learned about the complex cognitive and social processes of gang desistance maintenance. Thus, carried forward through Mary's and Michael's legacy of

motivation, I hope this study inspires further theoretical and empirical exploration of criminal gang desistance.

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Appendix A

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM - INDIVIDUAL

Stigma versus gang desistance: The implications of prejudice in desisting gang members' former gang member identity formation and their reconnection with non-gang communities.

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I agree/do not agree to the interview being sound recorded.

I wish/do not wish to have my recordings returned to me.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet

Signature: ..... **Date:** .....

Full Name - printed .....

Appendix B

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Stigma versus gang desistance: The implications of prejudice in desisting gang members' former gang member identity formation and their reconnection with non-gang communities.

Kia Ora and greetings,

First of all, thank you for showing interest in this project and taking your time to read this. Below, you can find some information on what this study is all about.

About me

My name is Gabor Radak, I am a Massey University Doctoral candidate. I have worked in social services for several years, where I met and worked with ex-gang members, who have turned their lives around and worked for social services as help professionals. The significant changes these people have made in their lives has sparked my curiosity to understand more about this transformation phenomenon.

The aim of the research

In this study, I would like to look into the lived experiences of stigma and rejection of gang members face(d) during the process of leaving the gang. Firstly, the study will aim to explore how this experienced stigma impacts on the gang member's gang exit. It will also investigate how those gang members who are in the process of leaving the gang approach and deal with the experienced stigma. In addition, the research seeks to understand whether former gang members change their social networks as a result of their 'career' change. Finally, and most importantly, with your contribution this project aims to improve the knowledge base and bring attention to social stigma and its effects on gang exit.

So, who and what does this involve?

I am hoping to recruit male, adult English-speaking volunteers, who are over 18 years of age and have successfully left their gang and are currently working or volunteering as a helping professional for one of the social service agencies, churches, or self-support groups. People who meet the above description would be invited to participate in an individual interview with me.

Procedures

The individual interview would occur at a mutually agreed time and venue. Although I will attempt to organise face-to-face meetings at a location that is most convenient to you (except your and my own home) this may not always be feasible. If the arrangement of face-to-face interview is impracticable, online (zoom, Teams, messenger) or phone interviews will be set up.

The interview will last for the maximum of 90 minutes. About 15 minutes is the initial discussion about the project, 15 minutes is allocated to discuss the aspects of this Information Sheet, and to sign the Participant Consent Form, and the rest is an individual audio-recorded interview. I have attached the interview questions for you to have a look at, so you know what questions I will be asking.

The digitally recorded interviews will be either typed up by me or a transcriber (someone who is not connected to the research but is paid to write up the voice recorded interview). This person will not know your name or identity and they will sign the Confidentiality Agreement form to confirm they will keep your information private.

To assist the transcription process I may also use a digital software called *Otter.* To read more about Otter please check out its website: *https://otter.ai/*. If you would like to know more about Otter's privacy and security policies and regulations, please see: *https://otter.ai/privacy-security*

After the interview is typed up, I will re-contact you and ask you to review the written record of the interview, which will take you around 30 minutes. After reading the written record of the interview, if you feel you have missed something important out you can add further

information. However, you will also have the right to tell me to delete any part of your story, or the parts that you believe may lead to people identifying you and others or you can choose to withdraw your entire interview record.

After the interview we will discuss the details of a timeframe and the method of you returning the checked written interview record. If I do not hear from you by the date we will have agreed on, you will be unable to change, delete, or withdraw the interview record and I will consider you consent to the content of the interview to be analysed and some parts of it included in the final report.

For your time and travel cost a small compensation of a $30 fuel voucher will be offered.

What will happen with your information?

To maintain confidentiality all data with your name and identity will be kept on my password-protected computer and all your signed forms will be securely kept in a locked filing cabinet which I only have access to. My supervisors and the transcriber may hear or read what you have said during the interview, but they will not know your name or identity. The digital and hard copies of all collected data (digitally recorded and transcribed data) and all the signed documents will permanently be deleted and destroyed 3 years after the completion of all the requirements of the Doctoral degree.

I would like to highlight that from your interview summary I will use some of your quotes or sentences in the thesis. These quotes and sentences may also be included in further articles, conferences, and professional presentations as an outcome of this research. You and other participants will not be named in such publications and all participants' identities and the identities of others will be kept confidential.

Participant Rights

If you agree to take part, your rights are:

You understand that participation in this study is voluntary

You can choose not to answer a question I may ask

You can ask questions at any stage of the study

You may stop the interview at any time

Access to a summary report of the findings at the completion of the study

You may add, change, delete parts of or withdraw the entire interview record until our mutually agreed date for you to return your checked written interview record

You may withdraw from the study prior to the interview transcript being finalized

What discomfort and risks associated with this research and how to manage them?

Discussing your life and personal experiences may bring up emotions for you. Should you experience any discomfort by recalling an unpleasant memory during the interview please tell me so I can switch the recorder off and we can have a short break. If this situation happens, what is discussed after the recorder is turned off, it is 'off the record'. I will also have a phone available for you if you need to call your own support person.

Should you need professional input, the following 24/7 anonymous phone line services will be available for further support:

Anxiety New Zealand Trust (0800 Anxiety)

Life Line Aotearoa (0800 543 354) or Suicide Crisis Services (0508Tautoko)

Need to talk? (1737)

Criminal disclosure

None of my questions are designed to ask about criminal activities and every step will be taken to avoid any intentional and accidental criminal disclosure. Therefore, before our interview, we discuss this clause of the Information Sheet in detail. However, if during our interview, I sense that you are about to disclose incriminating or harmful information to yourself or others, I will promptly remind you of the purpose of the interview and restate the question I originally asked.

If any information of a criminal nature is disclosed to me despite our precautionary actions, the

interview will be stopped, and the recorder will be turned off. Any information of criminal activity will be discussed with my supervisors and be handed over to the New Zealand Police if the information is deemed to put you, others, or the wider community at risk.

My contact details:

gabor.radak.1@uni.massey.ac.nz

Or ring me on

[redacted]

Alternatively, you can contact my supervisors:

Professor Kieran O'Donoghue

Phone: 64 (0)6 9516517
Location: 7.31 7th Floor, Social Sciences Tower, Massey University, Palmerston North

Dr Vincent Wijeysingha

Phone: 64 (0)6 951 6503
Location: Room 7.06, Social Sciences Tower, Massey University, Palmerston North

Looking forward to hearing from you

Gabor Radak

Committee Approval Statement

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, Application SOB 22/36. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Gerald Harrison, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, telephone 06 356 9099 x 83570, email humanethicsouthb@massey.ac.nz.

Appendix C

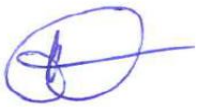
Evidence of Consultation

This letter is to confirm I, Maria Davis, Kirikiriroa Marae Whaea have consulted with Gabor Radak, Massey University PhD Candidate on 11 May 2022.

Our consultation took place to agree on the provision of Māori cultural supervision by me if Gabor's general knowledge of Māori kawa and tikanga is in need of enhancement to conduct culturally appropriate research interview with a potential Māori participant.

Signed:





Whaea Maria Davis

Gabor Radak

Appendix D

3/11/2022

Dear: Gabor Radak

Re: Ethics Application - SOB 22/36 - Stigma versus gang desistance: The implications of prejudice in desisting gang members' former gang member identity formation and their reconnection with non-gang communities.

Thank you for the above application that was considered by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee:

Human Ethics Southern B Committee at their meeting held on **Thursday, 14 July 2022**

On behalf of the Committee I am pleased to advise you that the ethics of your application are approved.

Approval is for three years. If this project has not been completed within three years from the date of this letter, reapproval must be requested.

If the nature, content, location, procedures or personnel of your approved application change, please advise the Secretary of the Committee.

Yours sincerely



Professor Craig Johnson

Chair, Human Ethics Chairs' Committee and Director (Research Ethics)Research Ethics Office, Research and Enterprise Massey University, Private Bag 11 222, Palmerston North, 4442, New Zealand T 06 951 6841; 06 95106840 E humanethics@massey.ac.nz; animalethics@massey.ac.nz; gtc@massey.ac.n

Appendix E

Advertisement

Kia Ora and greetings,

My name is Gabor Radak, a Massey University PhD candidate. I am undertaking a study which explores former gang members' experience of stigma, in relation to its impacts on their gang exit and their (re)connection and relationship maintenance with non-gang communities.

For this study I am looking to interview up to twenty adult males:

- who are over 18 years of age,
- who have successfully left the gangs and
- who have been working in a help profession position (such as social workers, counsellors, probation officers and correction officers, psychologists etc.) and/or volunteering for one of the social agencies or churches

to share their experience of exiting the gang and their perception of stigma during and post-gang membership status.

If this sounds like you, or you would like more information, please contact me for a more detailed information sheet

[redacted]

gabor.radak.1@uni.massey.ac.nz

Gabor Radak

Appendix F

Request Letter

To whom it may concern

My name is Gabor Radak and I am a Massey University student currently undertaking PhD research on how former gang members, during the process of leaving their perspective gangs and entering helping professions overcome the experience of enacted stigma and rejection of the conventional society.

I am hoping to interview male, adult English-speaking volunteers over 18 years of age and have successfully left their gang and are currently working or volunteering as a helping professional for one of the social service agencies, churches, or self-support groups.

If you meet the above description or know people who might meet this description and might be interested in participating in an interview about their journey or have any questions about this study would you, please contact me via my email address or my cellphone number:

gabor.radak.1@uni.massey.ac.nz

[redacted]

Alternatively, you can contact my supervisors:

Professor Kieran O'Donoghue

Phone: 64 (0)6 9516517
Location: 7.31 7th Floor, Social Sciences Tower, Massey University, Palmerston North

Dr Vincent Wijeysingha

Phone: 64 (0)6 951 6503
Location: Room 7.06, Social Sciences Tower, Massey University, Palmerston North

Looking forward to hearing from you

Gabor Radak

Appendix G

Recruitment Map

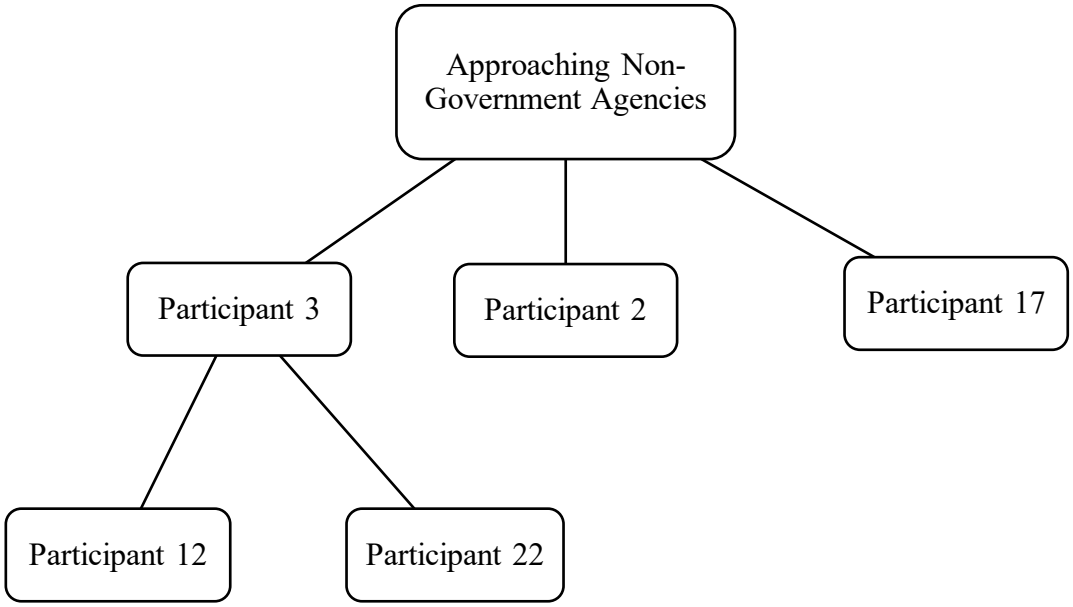
In this recruitment map, the arrows signal the referral pathways. When more arrows point to one participant, it means that the participant was known to or referred by those from whom the arrows originate. Rapoport (1977) attributes a participant's reputation or popularity to the force field bias in the recruitment process, which disproportionately increases their likelihood of being recruited.

Primary contacts were typically managers or staff members of agencies with whom I had former collegial relationship. These contact people either directed me to potential participants or were able to refer me to secondary contacts, usually their colleagues, who had direct links to eligible participants. In most cases, I had limited or no prior connections with secondary contacts. The recruitment pathways outlined below list the number of participants recruited through each of them and demonstrate how snowball sampling functioned in practice and the levels it reached within each cluster of recruitment style.

Advertisement:



Convenience Sampling:



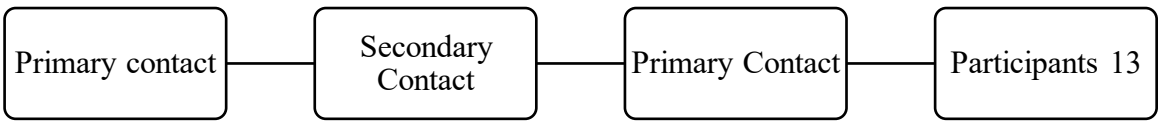
Recruitment Through Former Colleagues:

Primary Contact → Participant (1)

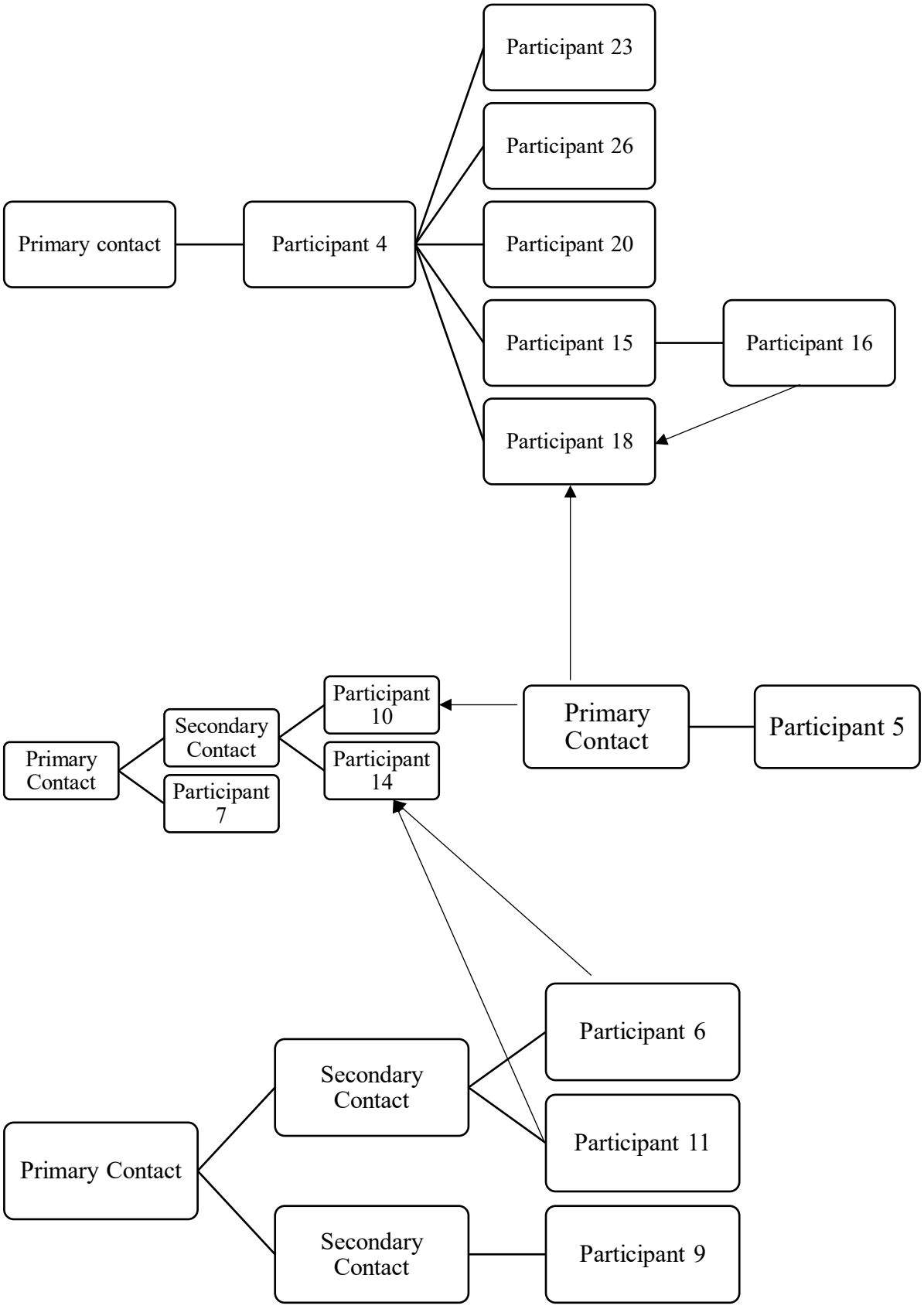
Primary Contact → Participant (24)

Primary Contact → Participant (25)

Primary Contact → Participant (19) → Participant (21)



(A primary contact referred me to an agency manager, who declined my request but directed me to another agency, where my former colleague ultimately connected me with a participant. This example illustrates the relational nature of snowball sampling and demonstrates the crucial role of study's cultural advisor, Mrs Davis. Her guidance was instrumental in recruiting several Māori participants, whose engagement in this research was mediated through layers of trust perceived from established social and kinship connections.)


Participant 23
Participant 26
Primary contact
Participant 4
Participant 20
Participant 15
Participant 16
Participant 18
Participant 10
Primary Contact
Participant 5
Secondary Contact
Primary Contact
Participant 14
Participant 7
Participant 6
Secondary Contact
Participant 11
Primary Contact
Secondary Contact
Participant 9

Appendix H

Interview Guide

- Thank the participant for coming along and ensure he is comfortable
- Provide an explanation of who I am
- Read Information Sheet out loud and ask if the participant has any questions – highlight and reinforce the criminal disclosure section and the rights of the participant.
- Ask the participant for his consent to record the interview and explain why it is important to capture accurate conversation.
- Emphasise that I will be the only one who knows the participant's name and identity even though my supervisors and the transcriber may hear or read what the participant has said.
- Describe the role of the transcriber and the confidentiality and privacy process the transcriber need to adhere to.
- Explain the possible use of transcription software, Otter AI. In the Information Sheet point out the Otter AI website if participant wants to know more about this tool.
- Present the participant with the Consent Form and discuss any questions and get them to sign it.

Theme: Gang engagement

What do you think what circumstances played significant part in your life that led you to join the gang?
How old were you when you joined the gang?
How would you describe your gang membership? (Fully engaged in the gang life or a prospect of a gang)
During your membership, have you ever thought that you would eventually leave the gang?
Do you still have connection(s) to your respective gang?
If so, what's your connection like, can you please explain?

If you don't have connection with the gang itself. Do you still have connection(s) with individual members of your respective gang?
If so, how does this connection look like?
Are these individuals still connected to the gang?

Theme: Gang exit

How long did you stay in the gang (if exited)? Or if you are still a member how long ago did you stop engaging in the criminal aspects of the gang?
How old were you when you felt that the gang or the criminal nature of the gang was not for you anymore?
How old were you when you left the gang or the criminal part of the gang?
How would you describe your gang exit was a sudden event or a gradual withdrawal?
How did the other gang members (and leadership) take your decision to leave the gang or the criminal characteristics of the gang?

Theme: (Re)connection with the non-gang communities

During your gang membership, were you maintaining connection with the outside world of the gang? Who were these non-gang communities?
If you did not maintain any connection with non-gang communities, do you remember what non-gang community was the first you (re)connected with?
How did you come to the decision to connect with this particular community?
Were you still holding onto your gang membership?
If so, how did the other members of the gang find you 'branching out'?
If you exited the gang before you (re)connected with a non-gang community, with whom were you spending your time?

Looking back, do you think this initial connection with the non-gang community helped you leave the gang or the criminal aspects of the gang? If so, how did it help?

Theme: Stigma during or shortly after exiting the gang

Have you ever experienced/felt, non-gang communities' discriminating approach towards you when you were fully committed to your gang membership status? If so, in what form did the non-gang communities inflict discrimination?
How did you manage these stigmatising experiences and feelings?
When you started to engage with the non-gang community, did you immediately tell the members about your background?
If so, do you know how the non-gang community members reacted to you joining their community?
If you did not, why did you keep it a secret?
Have you ever had any issues with any of the non-gang community members specifically because of your background?
If so, how did you deal with this problem and community members??
Have you ever felt going back to your respective gang (fully committed) because of the experienced discrimination and/or prejudice? If you did, what kept you away from re-joining the gang?

Theme: employee or volunteer of social service agency or church

How did you come to the decision to work or volunteer for a social service agency or church?
How long ago did you start working or volunteering for a social service agency or church?
When you first started working or volunteering for these agencies, were you still in the gang?

When you first started working or volunteering for these agencies, did you tell your colleagues or did they know about your (former) gang member status?
What was their initial reaction to you? How did you deal with these reactions?
Have you ever felt you have been treated differently at work or volunteer placement because of your background? If so, how did they treat you differently?

Have you ever utilised your gang knowledge background to engage with the agencies' clientele?
If so, how did it work for you and the client(s)?
If you have not, what prevented you from not using this knowledge?

Theme: Stigma now

Are you still connected to those non-gang communities you were (re)connecting when you were leaving or shortly after you left the gang?
If so, how do you feel, the non-gang community members regard you now?
If you are not connected, what made you leave this community?
Do you think, the connection with this non-gang community helped you build other connections with non-gang communities or non-gang affiliated persons?
What was your experience of connecting to other non-gang communities?
Are you still experiencing discrimination or prejudice because of your former gang member status or your former connection to the criminal aspects of the gang?
If so, from what part of society you predominantly experience discrimination or prejudice?
What do you think, why this part of the society discriminates people?
Do you think, the methods you used to use to deal with discrimination and prejudice have changed since you have left the gang or the criminal aspects of the gang?
Do you think, in every situation you now use the same method to deal with the experienced prejudice or discrimination?
If you haven't had any experience of discrimination or prejudice for a long time, what do you think why it is?
Do you think, working or volunteering for a social agency or church reduced the experienced stigma from general society? If it has, what do you think why? If it has not, what do you think why not?
How would you describe your current connection with the non-gang world? do you think it can ever change to the better or worse because of your former gang membership status?

Additional Questions/ Conclusion

- Before I conclude this interview ask the participant for any other comments, suggestions, questions, or anything else he wants to add apart from what we have spoken about?

- Ask the participant how he would like to receive the written interview record whether in the post or in an email?

- Discuss and agree with the participant on a suitable timeframe and method for him to return the checked written interview record and the signed Authority for the Release of Transcripts form.

- Remind the participant if he fails to get back to me with the interview record changes by the date we agree on, I will start analysing his interview data and from that point, he will be unable to add, change, delete, or withdraw his interview record.

- Inquire from the participant whether he knows anyone else who would fit the research criteria and might be interested in participating in this project.

- Finally, thank the participant for his time and sharing his story with me. For his time and travel cost, offer $30 fuel voucher.

Appendix I

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

This appendix provides a brief overview of IPA's second and third step which included: colour coding, initial noting, and development of categories and themes. Certain sections of transcript were systemically highlighted and annotated, based on their relevance to research questions. (In this instance: Research Question 1; What experiences of stigma do desisting gang members have?) My reflections served to capture the nuances of the account and later helped the identification of consistencies and divergences when participants' experiences were compared to other participants' life stories.

Raw data extracts were organised into relevance groups, which comprised of a series of individual columns that appeared to share conceptual similarities. While the columns represented emerging themes, the relevance groups had the potential to become categories or life phases. Initially, there was considerable overlap among themes and categories but as data saturation and analysis progressed, the distinctions between the developing themes and categories were clarified and thematic boundaries were refined accordingly.

Raw Data Excerpts of Heta's Transcript:

"Dad won't be dropping you off."; "What do you mean? The dads dropping the other kids off." She says "No, your dad will never drop you off, you will never see your dad again?" That's sort of information at 5, it rocked me and then the next day I went to school I was like watching, then I was watching more, then I remember it gave me a profound focus on other men with their children so I was like I was looking for somebody now or I was looking at something and I remember his name was [redacted]. He was the president for [gang's name redacted] had the big V8s, gold jewellery, I thought you know, and he looked happy, had money and cars. And I says to my mate "Dude who is that?", one of my mates said "That's my uncle, that's my mum's brother, and he's got some mean V8s, and he's got this and he's got that, he is a gangster." I says "Wow, he is a gangster". I didn't know what a gangster was really sort of knew what my transformers were, that was about it.

Reflections: feeling different due to fatherlessness, searching for a father figure - propelling him toward the gang world.

so my mates were a little bit more advanced because it's the uncle that'd been around the culture. Since they were a little bit older, I was just fascinated eh, I was "Man, he looks cool, he looks tough, he looks strong, he looks awesome. I wanna a dad like that." But it just led me to hang around my mates and around him and I guess I just started idolising them. I went from getting a shellshock of never going to have my dad to them.

Reflections: idolisation of gang leader, who is displaying power, prestige, security, and financial stability - attraction to gang life is developing.

I just sort of like had good mates that were nephews of him, so I hung around them you know I got that very "Who is this? What are you doing?"; "Ah, this is the bro."; "What are you good at?" You know, sort of, some of the things I had in mind that with my mother were good at that's soft, those things were frowned upon. So I am a good drawer, that was just a big, I was just a laughingstock of that moment "Drawing is not going to make us any money. Gonna do anything in this world brother, you might of walked into the wrong neck of the woods, what are you thinking?" You know. Sort of a thing, in my world, so I got dumped on my head pretty much with some of my answers I realised "Oh, these things, none of these things that I liked were. They wanna know about what other things so obviously violence, stealing. "Can you steal?"; "No, but I give it a good shot." You know. So I started to seek the affirmation of the gang, so I started stealing.

Reflections: increasing delinquency as a result of gang involvement.

I became jealous of other children and because I had no-one to communicate or process it with. My mum just gave me a sort of a real blung after that "That's it, don't bring it up again." I was like "Fuck, I am not talking about it and understanding it." I was getting nothing from mum, teachers were never like, "I am not a counsellor, I am your English teacher." So everywhere I'd gone I got kinda rejected. So, no there was no answers, a whole heap of pain, no-one was giving me any solution or working me through, helping me understand it, not even "One day, you know, we can connect you to a really good, you can still you know". There was nothing so it was just pain in the soul, no matter what I did I couldn't shake it off because the next day I am going to school, and then the next day I am going to school, and every day I am getting to school and I have got this wide focus, you know, I am walking in and I am watching this fella shake his hands, and I was like everywhere I look saw these dads and I was just this hyper sensitive focus and it was so upsetting.

Reflections: due to his lack of father figure, Heta becomes conscious about being different from his peers - consistent with the previous comment, fatherlessness (solo parent household) is one of the contributors of gang entry.

My mum, she had a lot of mental illnesses, as well as physical so she was very disconnected, very more worrying about herself and then. Well at 6 years old, 7 years old I got pretty hard out, I was fighting. I beat my teacher up then I was expelled from, I was about 6. I hadn't been going long and I beat her up,

Reflections: Heta's mother's inadequate parenting, solo parent household - all add up to displaying violence. This results in being isolated from school and prosocial peer groups and removed from mother's care.

From 6 years old till I was 15, 16. I lived with my aunty and uncle I would have holidays back home with my mum. I pretty much got dropped in hell when I got taken to my aunty and uncle's. They were really violent eh. Absolutely, absolutely, that's where I learnt, that was my breeding ground, my training ground.

I had been knocked out. In the sink, and I woke back up, I couldn't see through one eye he was still going. He just smashed the shit out of me. It felt like, it was probably an hour, but it felt like half a day. I pissed myself, there was blood everywhere, my whole face was just like a big balloon it was all warped everywhere. And my uncle beat me, I remember he dragged me, threw me in the room, shut the door, and boom I was like stuck on the ground, the anxiety or whatever it was. So I couldn't believe what had just happened. It's true eh.

Reflections: in a new placement - further exposure to violence, internalising worthlessness and helplessness - other factors aiding gang entry

Something we all got in common is broken heart, that what brings us together, birds of a feather flock together eh? When I was in school, fuck I was rejected all the time bro, there were kids growing up in good homes they don't understand violent home, and there were us kids didn't understand them. And because we were so around the violence we were just like "You are a pufter", then to us "You are that sweet guy, but you are always angry and bitter." Except this one kid, Jessica this girl in our class she never was scared, her dad was the butcher a strong man, integral man she used to always say "Ah, you are always so angry, yeah you know, you need to learn to calm down." I said "Shut your mouth, you know." She used to laugh, nothing would ever phase her, hit her. I realised now she had a character and integrity she'd be the only one who'd say something. The boys feared to say something, but she'd always tell me "You are not really tough."; "Fuck up, you know."

Reflections: gravitating to like-minded peers, feels rejected in prosocial groups - another factor propelling him towards gang entry.

since I was 5 bro, I focused all my life to be a gangster, to be tough. So it was a big part of my identity,

Reflections: gang member identity development, the main stigmatising factor after exiting

The Title of Preliminary Category and its Themes:

Heta's Precursors of Gang Entry

Family	*Peers*	*School*	*Geographics - Neighbourhood*	*Interest (Idolisation)*	*Initial Delinquency*
I think, for me so I grew up, when I was born my mum'd just come out of a divorce, she was a single mother, the area we stayed in, so like I was fatherless. I remember it like yesterday I was around 5 years old, I just started going to school, and I asked my mum and I went to school, and I noticed dads dropping their kids off, see half the time. I was like "Oh mum I don't want you to drop me off tomorrow, I want dad to." She says "Dad won't be dropping you off."; "What do you mean? The dads dropping the other kids off." She says "No, your dad will never drop you off, you will never see your dad again?" That's sort of information at 5, it rocked me and then the next day I went to school I was like watching, then I was watching more, then I remember it gave me a profound focus on other men with their children, so I was	so my mates were a little bit more advanced because it's the uncle that'd been around the culture. Since they were a little bit older, I was just fascinated eh, I was "Man, he looks cool, he looks tough, he looks strong, he looks awesome. I wanna a dad like that." But it just led me to hang around my mates and around him and I guess I just started idolising them. I went from getting a shellshock of never going to have my dad to them.	Something we all got in common is broken heart, that what brings us together, birds of a feather flock together eh? When I was in school, fuck I was rejected all the time bro, there were kids growing up in good homes they don't understand violent home, and there were us kids didn't understand them. And because we were so around the violence we were just like "You are a pufter"	He was the president for [gang's name redacted], first gang I joined so he stayed just around the corner form us	I was just fascinated eh, I was "Man, he looks cool, he looks tough, he looks strong, he looks awesome. I wanna a dad like that." But it just led me to hang around my mates and around him and I guess I just started idolising them. I went from getting a shellshock of never going to have my dad to them - He was the president for [gang's name redacted], first gang I joined so he stayed just around the corner form us big, he had the big V8s, gold jewellery, I thought you know, and he looked happy, had money and cars.	I just sort of like had good mates that were nephews of him, so I hung around them you know I got that very "Who is this? What are you doing?"; "Ah, this is the bro."; "What are you good at?" You know, sort of, some of the things I had in mind that with my mother were good at that's soft, those things were frowned upon. So I am a good drawer, that was just a big, I was just a laughingstock of that moment "Drawing is not going to make us any money. Gonna do anything in this world brother, you might of walked into the wrong neck of the woods, what are you thinking?" You know. Sort of a thing, in my that world, so I got dumped on my head pretty much with some of my answers I realised "Oh, these things, none of these things that I liked were. They wanna know about what other things so obviously violence, stealing. "Can you steal?"; "No, but I give it a good shot." You know. So I started to

like I was looking for somebody now She had a lot of mental illnesses, as well as physical so she was very disconnected, very more worrying about herself and then. Well at 6 years old, 7 years old I got pretty hard out, I was fighting. I beat my teacher up then I was expelled from, I was about 6. I hadn't going long and I beat her up, so yeah, I was finished and then my mum had had problems with my older sister and had whangai her out, so given her away to my dad's family to be raised. I pretty much got dropped in hell when I got taken to my aunty and uncle's. They were really violent eh. Absolutely, absolutely, that's where I learnt, that was my breeding ground, my training ground. No they weren't associated with gangs, but my uncle and aunty had been in violence from their parents, so it was intergenerational. I'd been beaten often, and well beaten, it was terrifying. I remember,					seek the affirmation of the gang, so I started stealing.

because my mum never hit us, she just “Cut that out!”, that’s about it. I lay on the ground just frozen, for I remember it was still light in the day, and it went dark, and they were still doing whatever, and then it was, everyone had gone to bed. I realised everyone went to bed. I just remember crawling up into the bed that was given and just lying there. I don’t know if I slept or what. That was my first day.					

Appendix J

Draft Questionnaire for Future Quantitative Research Project

Measuring Potential Stigma Experience During Gang Desistance Maintenance

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Number of Responses
I have been mistreated in my community because of my past involvement in the gang.						
I have been discriminated against by Police, and other agencies because of my past involvement in the gang.						
I have been discriminated against by employers because of my past involvement in the gang.						
People have avoided me because my past gang involvement.						
My relatives or friends have avoided me because my past gang involvement.						
People have insulted me because of my past gang involvement.						
My relatives or friends have insulted me because of my past gang involvement.						
I have been worried how people may react if they find out about my past involvement in the gang.						
It has frustrated me when people react negatively to my past involvement in the gang.						
I have tried to hide that I have past gang involvement, when I apply for a job or during employment.						
I have felt alone and isolated because my past gang involvement.						
I would have had better chances in life had I never been involved in the gang.						
I only disclose my past gang involvement to people who I trust.						
I have felt ashamed of myself because of my past involvement in the gang.						
My relatives or friends have been understanding and accepting of my past gang involvement.						
The general public have been understanding and accepting of my past gang involvement.						
I have always been open about telling people in my community about my past involvement in the gang.						
Having been in the gang has made me a stronger person.						
My past gang involvement has made me more accepting of other people.						
Total Score						

Each question is scored by x. Only score or tick the answer if it is the most relevant to the personal experience. The higher the score, the greater the stigma experience is.

Rating Scale	
0	**Strongly Disagree**
1	**Disagree**
2	**Neither Agree nor Disagree**
3	**Agree**
4	**Strongly Agree**

For example:

If the participant has had an actual experience of job discrimination:

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Number of Responses
I feel I have been discriminated against by employers because of my past involvement in the gang.	x					

If the participant has a strong belief that discrimination took place due to past gang involvement:

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Number of Responses
I feel I have been discriminated against by employers because of my past involvement in the gang.		x				

If the participant is unsure:

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Number of Responses
I feel I have been discriminated against by employers because of my past involvement in the gang.			x			

If the participant has some suspicion that job discrimination may have occurred but hesitant to attribute it directly to their past gang involvement:

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Number of Responses
I feel I have been discriminated against by employers because of my past involvement in the gang.				x		

If the participant firmly rejects that their former involvement in the gang in any way affected their employment opportunities:

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Number of Responses
I feel I have been discriminated against by employers because of my past involvement in the gang.					x	