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Bridget Kingsley

University of St. Thomas, Minnesota

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Contributing Factors in Maintaining Gang Affiliation among Adolescent Females
Exposed to Trauma

By

Bridget Kingsley, MA, LADC

MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the
School of Social Work
St. Catherine University and University of St. Thomas
St. Paul, Minnesota
in Partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Social Work

Committee Members:
Jessica E Toft, Ph.D., MSW (Chair)
Jane Hurley – Johncox, LICSW
Tara Mitchell, MSW, LICSW

The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

Abstract

Female gang affiliation has often gone overlooked, however, recent research indicates a need to examine this issue due to the increase in adolescent females becoming gang affiliated. A national survey collecting data on gang affiliation indicated that females account for nearly a third of the gang member population. Not only are females joining gangs at an increased rate but they are maintaining their affiliation despite maltreatment and abuse. The purpose of this project was to explore the factors that contribute and encourage adolescent females to maintain their gang affiliation even though it is likely that they will endure continued trauma. A review of the literature indicated victimization and abuse within the family system as a strong contributing factor for gang involvement and maintaining affiliation. Using a qualitative design, eight interviews were completed with professionals who have experience working with adolescent females affiliated with gangs. Using an inductive grounded theory method, the data was analyzed and coded, and emerging themes were recorded. Major similarities between the data and the literature were found in the areas of early childhood exposures to dysfunction within the family system, the developmental needs that are being met within the gang, gender role expectations and continued exposure to trauma within the gang. The findings, however, exposed a major issue within the communities that young females return to after treatment, placements or incarceration that make it difficult to avoid returning to their gang affiliations. These findings highlight the importance for social workers to engage the families and communities in prevention and intervention strategies when working with adolescent females who are gang affiliated.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my family and friends for all of the love and support they have given me over the last three years of grad school. It was not always easy but we made it through! Thank you for understanding when I was not able attend birthdays, weekends at the cabin and other festivities due to being tucked away in the library attempting to be productive. Also, thank you for the encouragement and (much needed) inspiration to stop procrastinating and get my work done. To my classmates and fellow MSW students, thank you for the support, camaraderie, motivation and anxiety when comparing progress on our research projects.

I would also like to acknowledge my committee members, Tara Mitchell and Jane Hurley-Johncox who provided me with support in conducting this research. Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedules to read my paper and offer me constructive feedback. Thank you for sharing with me your insights, knowledge and resources that were incredibly beneficial to my project.

I also wish to acknowledge my committee chair, Jessica Toft who provided me support and encouragement through the completion of this research project. Thank you for your structured agendas, set deadlines and overall organization. While I did not always meet my deadlines, you provided the support and the guidance that kept me motivated. I also want to thank you for your passion towards research; your ability to explain it in a way that is understandable inspired me throughout my time in your class (681 and 682).

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Introduction

Female gang affiliation has been rapidly increasing over the past few years; however, it has often been overlooked. Researchers are just starting to investigate this population directly rather than as a side note of male's gang activity. Research is building regarding the causes and precipitating factors in female gang involvement. One common influential factor in gang involvement appears to be exposure to trauma within their living environments - family homes or communities. Research indicates that the majority of women in gangs had similar stories of drug addicted parents and severe abuse, both physical and sexual (Molidor, p. 253). Fleisher (2004) indicated that 71% of gang affiliated females reported physical abuse and victimization occurring in the home. Furthermore, research suggests that many adolescents involved in the juvenile justice system report high rates of exposure to physical and sexual violence within their communities. Consequently, these same youth reporting exposure to violence within their own communities are reporting symptoms of trauma and PTSD at a much higher rate than youth who have not been exposed to community violence (Wood et al., 2002, pg. 130).

There are approximately 1.4 million gang members comprising of more than 33,000 gangs in the United States. Gang membership increased most significantly in the Northeast and Southeast regions, although the West and Great Lakes regions boast the highest number of gang members. The Minnesota State's Attorney identifies approximately 450 gangs located in Minnesota. According to the Metro Gang Strike Force, that number represents about 10,887 suspected and 2,744 confirmed or convicted gang members (The Eagle, 2008). A national survey collecting data on gang affiliation indicates that females account for 32%, nearly a third, of the gang member population (Wolf, 2012, p. 1). Local survey found that in Minneapolis, the police estimated that there are 150 to 200 girls who claim to be in a gang or clique. Molidor

(1996) explains that serious criminal behavior committed by female gang members has steadily increased over the past two decades and is becoming more common (p. 251).

When examining the prevalence of gang affiliation among adolescent females and the potential correlation between gang membership and exposure to trauma, it is important to have a clear understanding of trauma. The Center for Nonviolence and Social Justice defines trauma as “a word used to describe experiences or situations that are emotionally painful and distressing, and that overwhelm people’s ability to cope, leaving them powerless” (2008, p.1). The Center for Nonviolence and Social Justice goes on to explain that trauma has sometimes been defined in reference to circumstances that are outside the realm of normal human experience (The Center for Nonviolence and Social Justice, 2008). Similarly the Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders (DSM-IV) specifically defines trauma as

Direct personal experience of an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one’s physical integrity; or witnessing an event that involves death, injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of another person; or learning about unexpected or violent death, serious harm, or threat of death or injury experienced by a family member or other close associate (Criterion A1). The person’s response to the event must involve intense fear, helplessness, or horror (or in children, the response must involve disorganized or agitated behavior) (Criterion A2). (p. 463).

A number of researchers have found that exposure to trauma among females affiliated with gangs is a commonality (Chamberlain and Moore, 2002; Gover, 2008; Marsal, 2009; Molidor, 1996). Further, problems related to adolescent trauma are escalating in the recent years. Adolescent exposure to war, disaster, community or family violence, and physical and sexual abuse are becoming a major concern. For girls that have a history of sexual and physical

abuse gang affiliation is often looked at as a “safe place,” as they believe that gang membership provides them with friendship, care, love and an escape from their problems at home (Wolf & Gutierrez, 2012).

Furthermore, the externalization of aggression, conduct disorder and oppositional or defiant behaviors are often found in children who have been exposed to trauma (Koffman, Ray, Berg, Covington, Albaran & Vasquez, 2009, p. 239). These same behaviors and disciplinary problems are welcomed and encouraged by the recruiting gang members, as anti-social behaviors support the criminal activities of gang culture. Additionally, the gang culture and recruiting members provide that sense of support, approval and protection for adolescents who have been traumatized.

When looking at female gang affiliation, it is important to note that there is an initiation process that members must go through in order to be a part of a gang. The NCPC reports that females who are interested in joining a gang usually have to go through an initiation process, just as any male member would be expected to. Females joining gangs have been known to participate in and commit brutal violent crimes to prove themselves, to be taken seriously, and to build a reputation among the other gang members. Female gang members have been known to commit such crimes as robbery, kidnapping, assault, and even murder.

Researchers believe that it is important to start examining the role and activities of female gang members, as it should be understood by now that they are in fact joining gangs. While adolescent females appear to be joining gangs in an effort to find a sense of power, control, stability and respect after being exposed to trauma throughout their lives, the fact remains that further trauma often awaits them within their gang culture.

As the research has proven, gang affiliation among adolescent females is becoming an increasingly significant problem. Gender specific programming is becoming essential in providing care for these individuals. However, as strategies are developed for prevention and intervention techniques, it is becoming important to examine why females remain gang affiliated as research would indicate that the promise of stability, family, protection, money, freedom from abuse and respect are not always fulfilled. Social workers and other professionals must be aware and well educated on the hold that gangs have on female youth today; deterring them from becoming involved in gangs or continuing gangs may not be as simple as the threatening legal consequences. The purpose of this research is to examine the factors that contribute to adolescent females, who have been exposed to trauma, to maintain their gang affiliation.

Literature Review

Gender and Gang Affiliation

Street gangs, prison gangs, cliques, crews and cults are all familiar terms used to label a group of individuals that are associated through crime or anti-social behaviors. Even law enforcement and other justice orientated professionals differ in their definition of a gang, which is why clarification is important. According to O'Brien et al. (2013), research on gang affiliation in general can be difficult at times due to the confusion regarding what constitutes a "gang." The various definitions and characteristics of what it means to be a gang can provide researchers with a real challenge in that the scope and nature of the problem are dependent on our meaning of the word "gang" (p.418). For the purpose of this research, the Federal Bureau of Investigation's National Crime Information Center definition will be used to define the term gang. The NCIC

explains that a gang is, “a group of three or more persons with a common interest, bond, or activity, characterized by criminal or delinquent conduct” (National Crime information Center, 2012, p.1).

Since the beginning of research on gang affiliation the primary focus has been on the behavior of males. In fact, early research conducted by Thrasher (1927) indicated that there was no evidence of female gangs and he went on to report that this was a result of females lacking the “ganging instinct” (Cyr & Decker, 2003, p. 424). Esbensen and Winfree (1998) found that throughout the history of criminology, female involvement in crime has been neglected within research based on the assumption that women’s level of participation and seriousness of offending were too insignificant to warrant serious attention (p.507). Previous research documented that females were only secondary members engaging in gender-specific crimes, such as, seducing males, concealing weapons, and instigating fights between rival male gangs. For the purpose of this research, the focus will be on females who are affiliated with any gang, female only or co-ed, to examine the multiple roles females take on within the gang lifestyle.

Furthermore, researchers and professionals working with this population assert that the data is lacking on female gang members; not because they don’t exist but because they have been ignored. Esbensen and Winfree report that 38% of their larger sample of gang members were females, who were actively engaging in criminal gang activities (p. 516). This is a similar percentage to a national survey, which found that females account for 32% of the gang member population (Wolf, 2012, p. 1). The data that continues to be collected supports the fact that females are in fact joining gangs and becoming active members within their gang.

Not only is the membership of females increasing among gangs but researchers are finding that females are playing a more active role within their gang communities. In an effort to

expand on this research, Lauderdale and Burman (2009) conducted a study that examined the perceptions of professionals working in the correctional setting with female offenders. The research found that females are engaged in a variety of ways within their gangs that appear to be comprised of three roles: property of the gang, an associate of the gang (wife or girlfriend of a member) or an equal participating member.

Females are commonly viewed as “property” of the gang; this is seen as being on the low end of the continuum or a status that is not respected. Females in this role are often expected to traffic narcotics, perform sexual acts for other members or engage in prostitution. An associate of the gang is involved in less objectified activities, but is still to work for the gang in other ways which promote its viability. For example, associates may be expected to communicate directives to other gang members for their male partner who is unavailable at the time (i.e. prison or jail). This directive is respected as if it were given by the actual gang member (p. 272). Associates may also engage in providing for gang members, such as, offering food, shelter, money or even an alibi.

Even though females who are connected to the gang through their status as an “associate” or “property” are actively involved in gang activities, they are not seen as equals. However, there are females who are considered to be active, participating gang members. These females are often expected to fight, steal, vandalize, kidnap murder and commit any crime that a male member would in order to show their allegiance and gain respect (Molidor, 1996, p. 255). Supporting evidence from Taylor (1993) reported “female gang members now are hard-core and deadly” (p. 45). Mollidor adds to this by quoting Fishman who studied gangs since the 1960’s and found that “female gang members today have become more entrenched, more violent, and more and more oriented to male crime” (p251).

Trauma Exposure as a Predictive Factor in Gang Affiliation

In order to appropriately examine the exposure of trauma experienced by adolescent female gang members prior to them becoming affiliated with a gang, clarification is needed on “experience of trauma”. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services identified a clear understanding or idea of what it meant to experience trauma due to the numerous definitions that were being used by various professional groups. SAMHSA states the following definition:

Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being. (SAMHSA, 2012).

Additionally, trauma can be experienced as a onetime event or repeatedly over time. Throughout this paper, not only will the research be examining those who have directly experienced trauma but also those who have witnessed another experiencing trauma or learned that trauma had happened to someone close to them, as this is now included in the DSM-5 (Diagnostic Statistical Manual-5, 2013). For the purpose of this paper both of these categories (enduring a traumatic experience and witnessing of a traumatic experience) will be referred to as “exposure to trauma”.

Victimization within the family system. Once female gang affiliation was recognized as a growing problem, researchers started to look at why young women and girls were joining gangs. Fleisher and Krienert found in a multi-year study of the “North End” in Champaign, Illinois that early life experiences among their sample were riddled with abuse, parental crime and fatherless homes. A majority of their participants reported physical abuse and victimization within their homes. For those females reporting abuse in their homes, 26% stated that it was so

severe that they ran away from home to escape the beatings. Many of these girls had parents that had been arrested and incarcerated. Alcohol and drug abuse appeared to play a significant role within the family dynamics. The study found that parental criminality fosters an environment where gang involvement, delinquency and other at-risk behaviors are increased (p. 612).

Furthermore, a review of the research on adolescent females experiencing trauma and engaging in anti-social behaviors, Chamberlain and Moore (2002) found that developmental histories of the girls in the juvenile justice population reveal that have experienced extreme (rape, incest, beatings, etc.) and complex (repeated) trauma. This history appears to put girls at risk for a pattern of daily behaviors that is filled with intra- and inter-personal chaos and relational/social aggression. Intrapersonal chaos and aggression is the inability to regulate ones affect and calm the mind. While interpersonal aggression is the dis-regulation experienced within the interactions with others. Therefore, delinquency and conduct problems appear to increase when combined with a chaotic and stressful daily life which is highly associated with and extreme and complex trauma history (p. 101). Studies indicate that trauma can consist of sexual, physical or emotional abuse, drug addiction within the family system and other forms of violence experienced by the individual.

In support of Chamberlain and Moores' findings, Smith et al. (2006) found that within their sample, experiencing trauma was the strongest predictor of adolescent offending and health-risking sexual behavior for delinquent girls (p. 350). There appears to be a clear connection between trauma and criminal behaviors among adolescent youth, in that the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2004) reports that a significant amount of delinquent and gang affiliated youth identify physical and sexual abuse, neglect and maltreatment as well as exposure

to high risk, high crime communities and domestic violence as types of trauma that they have experienced (p.2).

However, a study which surveyed 500 “at risk” adolescent females who were currently attending summer programming within their school; abuse was not a common theme. The participant answers revealed that even though they had experienced abuse and trauma, sexual and physical abuse were not contributing factors to female gang affiliation. The data collected indicated that the fulfillment of emotional needs was a top motivator for young female’s gang membership. This would support the idea that current gang members lack the healthy development of attachments in their early childhood. Drug and alcohol use play a significant role in the participants lives, as they are using in an effort to self-medicate the lack of emotional needs being met (Wang, 2000, p. 626). The desire for attachment and the approval of drug and alcohol abuse are accommodated by gang culture, which will be examined further throughout this review of the literature.

Victimization within the adolescent’s community environments. Studies have found that not only do the majority of female gang members experience dysfunction within their family system, but their neighborhood life and community also appear to be chaotic. According to Molidor (1996), the majority of the young women in her study reported neighborhoods where poverty, drug use and gang activity were prevalent. Many of the women in the study described their neighborhood environments as “slums,” “the projects,” “ghettos” or “pits”. The community’s low socio-economic status provided minimal opportunities for the individuals living in these neighborhoods to better themselves (p. 253). Furthermore, as children age and increase their independence from their family system, their community environment begins to have a more significant influence on them. This leads to speculation that when adolescents are

surrounded by gang activity, which tends to be clustered in high-crime and economically disadvantaged neighborhoods, they are more inclined to engage based purely on the accessibility and normalcy of gang activity (Howell, 2010, p.8). Even when this violence is experienced as traumatic initially, it can also become the “norm” when exposed to it on a consistent basis. Adolescents may receive the message that violence, aggression and abuse are acceptable when they witness this within their home, community and school environments.

When examining research on adolescents, it is important to examine their educational environment. Schools are primarily seen as environments that provide structure, support, education and social networks for adolescents; it is also an environment where attachments have a significant impact on their progress, behaviors and experience. Recent research indicates that some gang affiliation is a result of “difficult schools,” where the population is saturated with adolescents who have been labeled with conduct disorders. A recent French study found that schools with high rates of chaos and violence had as many as 11% of their student population claim affiliation to a gang. This study suggests that when adolescents feel isolated and excluded from their school community due to disciplinary reasons, they turn to a community that embraces their oppositional behaviors (Howell, 2010, p. 4). Further, the National Gang Center reports that students who have a low sense of school attachment, low achievement scores, negative labeling by teachers and associate with aggressive or delinquent peers are at a higher risk of joining a gang (p. 7).

Needs Met within the Gang Culture

When faced with trauma individuals respond in a way that allows them to feel safe or make sense of the world around them. Some individuals respond using avoiding techniques, they may run away, deny that the trauma even occurred or be guarded and hyper-vigilant regarding whom they allow close to them. Individuals may also respond by re-creating their trauma by placing themselves in high risk situations or interacting with others that may place them in a vulnerable position. In an effort to avoid, deal with or re-enact the trauma that these girls experience in their communities and families, studies suggest that gang affiliation may meet their immediate needs. The gang becomes a coping mechanism forming around shared abuse and other early life trauma, as these young girls believe that bonding with other females with similar back grounds will help them find answers, support and companionship (Fleisher and Krienert, p. 611).Molidor's (1996) study of 36 young women, 15 of which identified as active gang members, supports the idea that young women are looking for that feeling of belonging, as the majority made statements that they were "looking to be a part of a family that cared" (p. 254). This research further supports the theory that many adolescent females lack healthy attachments within their own family.

Similarly, O'Brien, et al. (2003), found that even though there has been limited research on the motivation behind engagement in gang activities, studies suggest that adolescents are encouraged by the idea of companionship or friendship within the community of the gang, as well as, the desire to gain respect and feel important within their neighborhoods or communities (p. 422). It is apparent that young females are seeking strength and comfort in numbers. Wolf and Gutierrez (2012) also found that female adolescents look towards gangs as a "safe place," they believe that gang membership will provide them with friendship, care, love, and a way out

from problems at home (p.2). Research suggests that gang involvement may appeal to adolescent females in that it offers the promise of protection, as a study by the National Council on Crime and Delinquency in 1998 found that 92% of females in the California juvenile justice system had been the victim of some form of trauma or abuse within their family or neighborhood systems (Marsal, 2009, p. 233). Furthermore, once membership has been established, members are taught that the gang is their “real family.” Members conform to the gang’s set of values, language, customs and traditions that have been passed down through generations (Brown, 2007, p. 403).

A common coping mechanism among adolescents that have been traumatized is to reenact their trauma. Adolescents may actively seek opportunities to engage in reenactments of trauma, ranging from thrill-seeking to dangerous high-risk behaviors. Some children show regressive emotional and physical behavior after a traumatic event, while others act out (Ellensweig-Tepper, 2000, p. 19). The abused child may learn that adult and authority figures are not to be trusted. She may even equate caring with abuse and believe that she is to blame for the abuse. The perpetrator often threatens the child with punishment if she tells anyone. Thus the child grows up believing that dominance and subordination are normal in relationships (p. 20).

Additionally, the acceptance of anti-social behaviors can be an important need met by the other gang members. It is suggested that the reaction to traumatic events accounts for many of the features central to conduct problem behaviors, such as a lack of empathy, impulsivity, anger, acting out and a resistance to positive support. Traumatized youth tend to be more emotionally over-reactive and more likely to engage in coercive and non-compliant behaviors; this type of

emotional instability and poor affect regulation runs parallel with qualities exhibited by gang members (Smith et al., 2006, p. 347).

Given the reality that gangs are violent, engage in criminal activities and drug use is rampant, it can appear to be the perfect outlet for an adolescent who is trying to regain control by engaging in behaviors that are normal or familiar. Factors, such as child abuse, violence, neglect, inter-parental violence and parental drug addiction have been shown to greatly increase an individual's risk for involvement in dating violence and gang activity. Violence is seen as a means to conflict resolution and many females that have experienced abuse find it easy to adjust to violence experienced later in life. Additionally, females who have experienced violence may be attracted to dominant alpha males who can offer a sense of protection and respect, consequently these traits are found in male gang members (Ulloa, 2012, p. 398).

Victimization and Exposure to Trauma As a Female Gang Member

Physical and sexual exploitation. According to the literature, adolescent females are becoming gang affiliated in an effort to avoid abuse, gain respect, feel protected and be a part of a family they believe will protect them. However, paradoxically, their desire to avoid continued trauma is the fact that gang members are exposed to trauma at significantly higher rates than those not gang affiliated. Ulloa et al. (2012) found that while 41% of non-gang members report witnessing someone being shot, 79% of gang members had witnessed the same thing. This exposure to violence puts gang members at an increased probability of being victimized due to their proximity to crime and high risk environments. It is also believed that just the act of joining a gang puts these individuals in a mindset that is accepting of violence (p. 399). Additionally, females are exposed to the dual threat of sexual assaults by rival gang members, as well as victimization from their own gang affiliates. Cry et al. (2003) found that “gang

involvement itself opened up young women to additional victimization risk” (p.426) as a result of the male dominated culture. This research indicates that the very act of joining or being gang affiliated can place adolescent females in situation where trauma is likely to occur.

Supporting research of the trauma experienced by adolescent females within a gang, it is important to first examine the initiation process of joining a gang. A familiar term that is associated with gang initiation is getting “jumped in,” a ritual that requires the prospective gang member to fight several of the active gang members. This is also referred to as “walking the line,” in which the individual must walk through a line of gang members that are punching, kicking and engaging in other types of assaultive behaviors. Other rituals include killing someone or getting “sexed in.” Getting sexed in is having group sex with other members of the gang. Although many believe that this is the most common way for girls to join gangs, it should be noted that, girls who join this way are often not officially recognized as legitimate members. As studies show, females who decide to be initiated by getting sexed into a gang usually are shunned and not respected by both female and male members (NCPC, 2011). Further, Brown (2007) goes on to say that females are not able to choose who they have sex with when getting initiated in and could be subjected to a “train run,” where several gang members (male or female) in succession have sex with the female. It is important to note that within the gang culture this is not considered rape (p. 405).

Furthermore, even once a female has been initiated into the gang, the violence does not stop there. Fleisher and Kleiner (2004) report that many of the young women within their sample, were sexually exploited by the adult males in their own gang. The women indicated that although some of the men in their gang were family members, such as brothers or uncles, this did not mean that they would be protected from aggression or sexual exploitation (p.616). Supporting

evidenced found by Grover (2009) found that young women were looked at and used as “sex objects” by their own gang members (p. 105).

Maintaining Gang Affiliation through Victimization

Researchers have found support for four different reasons why young women would stay in gangs, even though they are likely more traumatized than they would be outside of the gang. These reasons include: known expectations, high tolerance for violence, acceptance of aggression and loyalty.

Research indicates that there is a definite inequality in regards to gender roles within gangs. While females tend to report a sense of equality, actual accounts of behaviors and abuse found by St. Cyr and Decker indicate that males dominate presence, controlling behaviors and disrespect of the females is tolerated (p.426). In support, Brown (2007) found that gender roles play a significant factor in the “normalizing” of violence against women within the gang culture. Male domination and female victimization are often a part of the gang culture. Female and girlfriend abuse among gang members is, in part, a product of the gender ideologies found within the gang. Physical and sexual violence toward young women, although not considered violence, becomes a learned behavior that is expected of members (p. 408). Females who may have been looking to escape dominant male gender roles often find themselves in that very same dynamic within the gang.

Through recent examination of gang involvement, there has been some awareness gained regarding why females are joining gangs. Now researchers are placing a focus on the motivation behind maintaining gang involvement, when it requires the individual to remain in an environment that is perpetuating their trauma. Gang life, while viewed as traumatizing,

reinforces familiar patterns of behavior. The structure, role expectation and level of violence provides the familiarity of family structure and offers clear expectations and reinforcement regarding how to achieve success within the system of the gang (Sharkey, 2011, p. 49).

Furthermore, girls who witness domestic violence are conditioned to tolerate victimization and are more likely to become victims themselves. They develop a belief or value system that allows violence to be an appropriate response to settle disputes, manipulate and get their needs met or to express difficult emotions (Brown, 2007, p.407). Their sense of self-worth becomes dependent on the approval of other gang members; it is built up and developed through behaviors that other gang members encourage and support. Rather than acknowledging the victimization that is occurring, females appear to develop a sense of pride in their gang related activities.

As previously mentioned, a common coping mechanism for females who have been sexually or physically abused is to act out aggressively or violently. Females may be attracted to gang membership, in that, carrying weapons, dealing drugs, intimidating other females and fighting are expected, suggesting that girls who identify with physical aggression may be actively seeking out gang membership to be a part of a community that is accepting of their desire to be violent and engage in high risk behaviors (Snethen, 2012, p. 45).

Research Question

In an attempt to further the body of research on gang affiliation among adolescent females, this study will focus specifically on the victimization of adolescent females who are gang affiliated. The following research question will examine the possible influence that exposure to trauma has on females who decide to join a gang. Based on the analysis of multiple

studies, the proposed research question is: What are the factors that encourage adolescent females, who have been exposed to trauma to maintain their gang affiliation, even though they likely endure continued trauma within the environment of their gang?

Conceptual Framework

Attachment Theory

When individuals experience chaos in trauma early on in their developmental stages, their attachments to those around them can be altered and in some cases, negatively impacted. Due to some of the literature shedding light on the attachment need that is met within the gang culture, it seems most appropriate to examine the motivation for maintaining gang affiliation, even though continued trauma may occur, through the framework of the attachment theory. According to Siegel (2012), when children develop secure attachments to parents these allow them to go out into the world to explore and develop relationships with others. Initially, children seek proximity to their attachment figures which gives them a sense of security. Parents typically provide a sense of security, just being near them can help children feel safe. As children grow older they internalize these relationships and begin to build a framework that other relationships are based on (p. 27). Research has found that just as easily as it is for parents or guardians to provide a sense of security, they can also provide children with a sense of danger that can impact how they internalize relationships.

Further, Bowlby originally predicted that early attachment experiences and the representations of those experiences affect core aspects of personality functioning, as well as interpersonal relationships, self-esteem and self-regulation of emotion and behavior. Under conditions of neglect, rejection, and abuse the child develops defensive processes that serve to

keep painful feelings and thoughts from consciousness (Joubert et al., 2012, p. 472). As the literature review previously mentioned, attraction to the world of gang activities and criminal behaviors can be an attempt to avoid the lack of healthy attachments and seek approval and connection with others who have experienced similar traumas.

Therefore, when exposed to a traumatic event, children's pre-trauma belief systems, psychological well-being, temperament and affective reactivity are all thought to meaningfully interact with their response to the event and how they make sense of the event once it has passed. According to the work of Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1977, 1980) along with Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) cited in Kilmann et. al. (1996), three attachment styles are thought to exist: secure, ambivalent and avoidant. It can be assumed that securely attached children are better able to cope with distress and children with ambivalent or avoidant attachment styles have minimal to no trust in primary caregivers, thus creating a greater level of distress in the face of a traumatic event (p. 558). Using the framework of attachment theory allows for social workers and other professionals to view adolescent females who are gang affiliated through a lens that considers both their unhealthy attachments and the influence that trauma has had on their lives. Furthermore, attachment theory takes it a step further by indicating that there is in fact a direct connection between trauma experienced by individuals and the type of attachments they develop with those around them. For the purpose of this research it is also important to have an understanding of the concept of disorganized attachment, a style of attachment that can occur when there is dysfunction between the caregiver and child. According to Main and Hesse (1990), disorganized attachment can develop within the relationship if the caregiver instills fear in the child through maltreatment, abuse, other fear provoking or disoriented behaviors (p 162). This results in the caregiver becoming a source of the child's panic and stress. Additionally, this

style of attachment impairs a child's ability to develop the necessary strategies to cope with stressful situations (Long, 2009, p. 624).

Methods

Research Design

Qualitative methods were applied to explore the factors contributing to adolescent females maintaining their gang affiliation. Due to existing gaps in the already limited research on the phenomena of female gang affiliation, the research was exploratory in nature; therefore the proposed research design was qualitative. Semi-standardized interviews were completed with professionals who have experience working with adolescent females who are gang affiliated. A qualitative approach was used throughout this study in order to further understand the motivation behind gang affiliation among adolescent females.

Sample

The target population for this study includes professionals who have experience working first hand with adolescent females who are affiliated with a gang. To obtain data regarding the motivation behind maintaining gang affiliation even when trauma is endured, respondents were selected based on their expertise and knowledge of gang affiliation. To be eligible for this study, potential participants were currently working with adolescent females that are gang affiliated, this included but was not limited to the following: licensed social workers, probation officers, community specialists, correctional officers or administration, community case managers and/or mental health professionals (therapists/psychiatrists). Participants were recruited through a purposive snowball sample. A committee member with the Womens Task Force in the state of Minnesota sent out the research information flyer (see Appendix A) to potential participants

working with the Womens Task Force that were interested in participating or knew someone who was interested. This committee member did not supervise any of the people on the task force, and in fact, did not work at the same organization with them. Additionally, directors with local programs that work with high risk, adjudicated females were contacted via public information provided on their facility websites. The flyer (see Appendix A) was also emailed to them detailing the purpose of the study and emphasizing the voluntary nature of the study. Directors were asked to disperse the flyer to participants that meet the criteria of the study. The flyer provided information detailing how interested participants could contact the principle investigator. The Director and potential participants were also be provided with the consent form explaining the details of the research and how to proceed if they were interested in participating. The directors did not press people to participate, nor did they ask whether they had participated. If an individual choose to be a part of the research study, following interview completion this researcher asked them if they knew of anyone who would fit the criteria for this study and who might be interested in participating. If so, they were provided with a research flyer and asked to contact the potential participant and explain the nature of the research and how to proceed if interested.

Protection of Human Subjects

Recruitment. Participants were informed that any participation in this research was voluntary and confidential. This research study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of St. Thomas prior to collecting the data. When eligible participants within the target population contacted the researcher expressing interest in participating, a copy of the interview questions (see Appendix B) and the consent form (see Appendix C) was sent to them. Sending the participants this information ahead of time allowed them to examine the questions

and information on the study before deciding if they were going to engage in the study and schedule an interview. On the consent forms presented to participants prior to their involvement in the study, the participants were informed of the purpose and procedures involved in the study (see Appendix C).

Voluntary participation. Furthermore, the consent process informed the respondent on the following topics: a brief description of the study's background, potential risks and/or benefits of participating in this study, steps taken to ensure confidentiality, steps taken to protect them from harm and contact information for the researcher and the St. Thomas IRB if they had any questions or concerns. Again, participation in the study was explained to be voluntary and participants were given the option to pass on any questions that he or she did not feel comfortable answering. Additionally, potential participants were informed that they had the option of discontinuing the interview at any time.

Confidentiality. In order to protect the participants in this study, ethical measures were applied to ensure that the participant's identity was kept confidential. As this interview needed to be transcribed, participants were informed that the interview was audio taped. The researcher explained that data collected from the interview process is to be presented as part of a clinical research presentation. Participants were made aware that any potential identifying information will be altered in order to protect confidentiality.

Data Collection

Instrument. The instrument used for this study was a semi-structured interview (see Appendix B). The questions were formulated by the researcher based on the appropriate conceptual framework. There was eleven open-ended questions. This interview format was utilized in order to gather the appropriate data, as it allows for the implementation of

predetermined questions, as well as the freedom to digress or probe beyond the answers to gather more information (Berg, 2009, pg. 107). The interviews were approximately 20 to 50 minutes in length and were recorded for transcription purposes. The questions focused on trauma experienced by adolescent female gang members and their motivation for maintaining their affiliation with their gang. Three of the ten questions specifically addressed the trauma experienced by female gang members and the needs that are being met through gang affiliation. The questions were formed after completing a review of the literature and discovering specific themes that were consistently presented throughout the research. The interview questions began with the intent to obtain basic demographic information on the participant's present caseload, however, they increased in complexity as they progressed.

Process. Participants contacted the researcher if they were interested in participating. Participants that were interested were asked to participate in a one time, face-to-face, interview regarding their expertise on female gang affiliation and factors that influence active participation of females in the gang culture. The researcher scheduled interview dates to meet with participants who met eligibility criteria at an interview location of their choice. Informed consent (see Appendix D) was reviewed and signed with each participant prior to the interview. Participants were then asked to engage in an interview regarding their experience working with their present caseload of adolescent females that affiliate with a gang.

Data Analysis Plan

A qualitative coding strategy called content analysis was used to analyze the findings extracted from the participant's interviews. According to Berg (2008), content analysis refers to a systematic methodology of critically examining and interpreting material in an effort to classify similar categories, themes and patterns (pg. 338). The interview transcript was reviewed and

examined in an effort to find codes and themes. A code is considered to be an interpreted pattern within the findings; a theme is then formed once three or more of that same code has been identified. The themes that were extracted from the codes within the content of the interview will then be clustered into general categories. In order to identify specific codes and themes, an inductive grounded theory method was utilized. The goal of this process was to move from the specific information (the specific words within the interview transcript) to the more general (themes and categories extracted from the findings). Open coding, another process for closely examining the possible meaning of the sentence, was used to dissect the findings line by line. To clarify, after identifying potential codes within the transcript, any code that appears three or more times was then be identified as a theme. Themes were then grouped into separate categories when the data required this.

Findings

This research focused on examining the potential factors that contribute to adolescent females maintaining their affiliation with gangs even though they may be poorly treated and experience significant trauma. The questions presented to participants focused on trauma experienced prior to and during membership. Additionally, this study attempted to examine the attachments adolescent females have with their families, peers and communities. Through open coding 10 themes emerged that were then organized into three main categories: *initial exposure*, *developmental needs and reinforcing gang membership*.

Initial Exposure

The category, *initial exposure*, is made up of the following themes: parental dysfunction, generational membership and sexual abuse. Throughout the research several participants

discussed the early childhood experiences of adolescent females that left them more susceptible to high risk behaviors. There was a consensus among the participants interviewed that many females had started off as “at risk” youth before they became “high risk.”

Parental Dysfunction. The data collected indicated that there was an element of dysfunction within the parental role of the family system:

“...a lot of them come from families where parents have experienced a lot of trauma too and it’s just like you don’t talk about it and I will keep your secret and you keep mine”.

The interviewees went on to explain that the parents’ trauma history created an environment that was unstable and undesirable to be in. Furthermore, the environment was often described the actual physical location of home as chaotic and, in some cases, non-existent.

“They have not had the stable environment, in that the family is without a house or without like a place where they’ve stayed more than a couple weeks at a time.”

“...girls who are more open might indicate that there is a lot of chaos or that there is nobody home or they are often times on run or just staying away from the home.”

The role of a father figure in young females’ lives plays an extremely important role. The complete absence of their father or lack of a relationship with him appeared to be a factor in young females becoming gang affiliated.

“...one parent households, father is in jail or they don’t know their father.”

“...they have no connection or little connection to their biological father.”

“Well, think for girls, females, definitely if there is a father figure involved I think it is less likely that they get involved in the gang stuff.”

Generational Membership. In addition to the reported dysfunction that was present in the immediate family system of adolescent female gang members, many participants verbalized a significant history of family members being involved in the gang lifestyle. The data revealed that many females involved with gangs are exposed to the lifestyle due to multiple generations being affiliated with gangs.

“I don’t know that they talk about it [family gang membership] very often but we know about it. I mean there are some families that we work with that it’s very dense. You know, the generational piece of it.”

“...a lot of our parents are also gang affiliated especially when you look at the Native American population and the Native Mob gang and the 218’s, their parents are heavily entrenched in it so it’s just an automatic flow for them.”

Sexual Abuse. The most common theme found within the data was participants reporting that the majority of the adolescent female gang members they have worked with have been sexually abused.

“Sexual abuse, physical abuse, neglect, witnessing like an unbelievable amount of violence.”

“A lot of the girls that I have worked with have reported some sort of sexual abuse, um perhaps rape, some physical abuse, whether it’s with family members, or friends or strangers...they have all reported those things before.”

“We have a high rate of girls that have been sexually abused. I would say that the results of that first trauma start the disconnection between their physical self and then enables those additional traumas to occur and sets up the dynamics where they equate having

someone else have ownership over their bodies and not knowing how to stand up for themselves necessarily.”

As the last quote indicates the traumatic experience of sexual abuse can greatly impact an adolescent female’s connection and understanding of herself. The coping mechanism of detaching from one’s own physical self allows the victim to survive the immediate trauma. According to the interviewee, this protective factor that was once a survival strategy distorts their tolerance of unhealthy relationships. The disconnection allows some adolescent females to continue to engage in unhealthy and destructive relationships, including gang membership, as the abuse and trauma is not personalized. Based on the data collected, the trauma of sexual abuse combined with the physical abuse, neglect and instability produces an adolescent that is desperate to get their needs met but ill-equipped to do so in a healthy way.

Developmental Needs

As adolescents experience developmental milestones as they grow and mature, it is not surprising that the data produced themes regarding the developmental needs adolescent females were trying to grasp as they journeyed into the gang lifestyle. The category, *developmental needs* is made up of the following themes: *connection, belonging and validation*.

Connection. As the data previously mentioned, many females working with the participants of this study, lacked a connection with their family. In an effort to develop connections with others many started to engage in high risk behaviors.

“I just see girls that are having a lot of random sex, that’s a way for them to make connections.”

Even when being mistreated or continually traumatized, the desire for connection appears to outweigh the abuse and fear. Participants indicated that the need for connection and acceptance is so deep that many females will ignore the potential danger. Additionally, this tends to be a familiar cycle for them, mimicking relationships they have within their own family system.

“...although the gang exploits them and they are usually being used there is also a feeling of true bonding going on because they are being fed, some of them are encouraged to go to school and better themselves and then there’s also that underlying exploitation but some of those relationships are similar with the relationships they have at home.”

“...you see this with a lot of kids who maybe grow up physically abused, even parents who’ve done horrible things to them; they have this undying need for acceptance by this parent even though they’ve done terrible things.”

Further, interviewees suggested that adolescents joining gangs are not necessarily leaving a bad situation (at home) for a good one (within the gang), but rather begin to engage with the culture due to the familiarity and predictability of the relationship dynamics and functioning of the gang system. As mentioned before the rules, relationships and behaviors may often appear similar to what an adolescent may have witnessed within their own family system. The data would indicate that if the gang can make an adolescent feel connected to others, despite the presence of dysfunction, their desire to maintain the bonds is stronger than the need for safety.

Belonging. It was apparent throughout the data collection process that the need to belong as an adolescent is a primary need. As with the desire to feel connected, participants indicated

that even when the gang affiliation results in significant trauma and breeches one's safety, the feeling of belonging overrides any desire to disengage with the group.

"It's camaraderie, it's acceptance, it's stability, loyalty and it gives them a sense of belonging I would say."

"I think it might fill a void, too. The void of feeling wanted and you're part of something where people are loyal and take your presence so seriously that it fills that void in an unhealthy, twisted way...but it fills it."

"...a sense of belonging when they come from broken families and trauma history, you are going to see them seek love and care from people that might provide for them. Often times it's a form of survival when they are very much engaged with the streets."

"...where it may not be sexual trauma it may be other trauma that like when you're in an army you bond with your brothers and you're fighting against a general cause whether that be your rival gang, so I think although there is that exploitation, all that belonging and you know having their own kind of family kind of plays a big part."

It is clear that adolescent females who become gang affiliated are so desperate to belong to something they are willing to jeopardize their own safety. This may be because of their skewed perception of safety, where they have never felt that sense of belonging or safety, so being a part of a group no matter how risky is better than being a part of nothing. It would also appear that the inconsistent attachments within their own family motivate them to find others they can belong with and feel accepted. Even though they may recognize that the group they belong with is unhealthy or negative, it is still more consistent to them than anything they have experienced before.

As the data shows the trauma history impacts the adolescent's judgment on developing healthy relationships, connections and a sense of belonging. Participants reported that the trauma continues to distort adolescent females identify and self-worth. This brings us to the third theme, validation.

Validation. Adolescents look to those around them for validation as they begin to develop their own identity and understanding of self. Unfortunately, self-esteem can then become based on the opinions and actions of others if an adolescent's sense of self does not have a solid foundation.

"I think that there are some that want to leave but they can't because they have been branded, like they are the main girl so their self-esteem is built up by the gang because you are the main girl. The 'homies' like you so you get that dose of self-esteem to where if you're taken from that it's kind of like 'where am I at in this world now?' 'If I am away from the gang where am I then.'?"

Furthermore, it is not uncommon for females to significantly invest emotionally into relationships. For some females with trauma in their background it may be the first time that they feel cared for and loved, they will go to certain extremes to maintain the feeling of being worth something to someone.

"...there is definitely a percentage of young ladies where their romantic relationships are everything to them and validate them as a person. They will take a lot of risks to maintain that relationship."

"I do believe that if you didn't have that trauma prior [to gang affiliation] you wouldn't be going somewhere else to look for someone to take care of you or acknowledge you....if

you didn't have all that trauma to where you've been hurt you've been abused you would have more of a self-worth".

When compared with other adolescent females, in regards to the desire to engage in relationships, female gang members are not that different. However, their tolerance for negative and unhealthy interpersonal relationships is quite high due to the trauma they have witnessed and experienced. Additionally, their observation of what others endure within relationships is also skewed. The data indicates that many females who are affiliated with a gang have witnessed abuse and turmoil within their parent's relationships. They continue to see this same dysfunction within the relationships of other gang members, manipulation, fighting, dishonesty and abuse are not uncommon. Furthermore, when the self-esteem and self-worth of young female has been so beaten down that they feel undeserving of care and nurturing, any indication that someone likes them or even loves them is going to make them feel excited, confident, happy, etc. These are going to be feelings that they will work very hard to maintain, even if that means engaging in behaviors that may contradict those feelings.

This research attempted to take a look at the attachment styles of adolescent females that are gang affiliated, the themes of connection, belonging and validation emerged from questions regarding the attachment styles participants noticed among their clients. In reviewing the data it is clear that becoming part of gang does in fact help some adolescent females meet developmental milestones of connection to others, however, the trauma they experience in early childhood may allow them to psychologically compartmentalize or disengage from the negative aspects of gang involvement, such as sexual exploitation. It would appear that the experience of belonging and connection seem to be more important to them than the significant trauma they have experienced or witnessed, however, the data indicates a cyclical pattern rather than a

hierarchy of needs. Meaning, a young female, who has experience trauma that has disrupted her attachments to caregivers, is seeking belonging and connection wherever she can find it. Further, she has learned that by detaching from her reality or compartmentalizing her trauma she can engage in relationships, even when abuse is present, and her need for attachments is fulfilled. However, this perpetuates the cycle, as the trauma continues her need for belonging and connection increases; resulting in further detachment and potentially leaving her vulnerable for continued trauma.

Reinforcing Gang Membership

The final category, *reinforcing gang membership*, is comprised of the following themes: *normalizing, substance use, role responsibility and community*. These themes were developed from codes that shed more light on the “how” and “why” females maintain their affiliation even when enduring continued trauma as part of the gang.

Normalizing. The attempt to normalize the cycle of trauma and gang affiliation was reported by several participants. While normalizing is a common defense mechanism for many, in the case of female gang members it appears to be a survival skill and a death sentence all in one.

“I think it’s the whole thing of ‘diminished expectations’, and you know, I think girls, especially if they have grown up with a lot of umm trauma or abusive relationships. It’s somewhat of a norm and they just get worn down and the ability to just get up and leave gets worn out.”

“...they can become desensitized to their experience and that seems to be all that they know...”

Even if removed from the lifestyle the tendency to normalize their experience as a female in a gang may result in their return to the lifestyle, as they are not able to believe that life could be different or even better.

“I think that it almost becomes normal and they expect it and again they see it as they take possession of it so it’s leaving one bad situation for another.”

“The whole experience of trauma leaves you with a funny filter to some extent. I think that just triggers girls to do all sorts of things. Their expectations for a good life are very small.”

Substance Use. When examining factors that contribute to females maintaining their gang affiliations, the issue of drug and alcohol use was discussed frequently by participants. While none of the interview questions directly addressed substance use among the population being researched, when asked about trauma experienced as an active gang member, many of the participants indicated that the use of drugs and alcohol was significantly connected to traumatic experiences.

“You know the obvious thing is they are just exposed to an unbelievable amount of drugs and violence and whatever and then I think just the whole partying thing, you know what ends up happening is they get really out of control drunk or stoned and then all sorts of people are having sex with them.”

The data collected provided insight into the destructive cycle of drug use within the gang lifestyle. Drugs are used to bring individuals into the group, however, they also are used to ensure they stay with the group.

“The known true gang members tend to not use, they are the suppliers. But they will use them [female affiliates] to deliver or they will get the girls hooked on them to keep them kind of locked into the lifestyle.”

“...it’s a constant connection to chemicals and a lot of females don’t have to pay for it because they will be getting it from their boyfriend. Or if they are pushing it, then they get to use part of it. For somebody that is chemically dependent, easy access and guaranteed supply.”

The lack of internalized healthy coping strategies increases the desire to maintain access to drugs and alcohol. Participants reported that many of their clients turn to substance use as a coping mechanism, therefore perpetuating the cycle of trauma and addiction. The use of drugs and alcohol also works as a disinhibitor for many young females; it clouds their judgment and allows them to engage in behaviors they may not normally partake in.

“Well whether they have been traumatized by the gang or before the gang they have got to somehow buffer all the feelings to stay...to be able to stay connected and not deal with the anger or the hurt that they have been through.”

“...then they want to feel numb and not have to experience the emotions of what they are going through, they talk about the shame and embarrassment of what they have to go through or what some of these men or women have put them through in the prostitution piece of it. So in order to endure the emotions it’s easier to just numb yourself and not think about it and that becomes a pattern and a cycle which gets them to the addiction. It is just a cycle of addiction, drug using, sex, violence and not wanting to deal with emotions, masking it and it’s just ongoing.”

At some level, the data suggests that, young females engaging in high risk sexual behaviors and gang activity have some awareness that these behaviors do not align with their value system, resulting in the need to self-medicate their shame and numb their emotions. Alcohol and other drugs become an accessible solution for many female gang members because it is one of the easiest ways to silence the demons for the past and present.

Role Responsibility. Similar to the theme of normalizing, role responsibility examined the phenomena of defenses utilized by female gang members in an effort to project ownership of their gang activities. Participants reported that many females will use defenses in an effort to avoid being the victim, once again.

“A lot of the girls sort of minimize the abuse that they go through in gangs and they view it kind of as, I don’t know, that that’s their work that they put in for the gang.”

“It’s funny because they will often; they will often describe it as though it is their choice. They don’t want to give up that power so they play it off like it’s not wrong, that ‘I’m part of this, it’s my job, I choose this, I am choosing to do this and I can stop if I want to.’”

“Sometimes they don’t even think that they are victims. They don’t think they are victims they think that it’s a choice that they are making so it’s a sense of belonging and that I am doing this on my own versus someone forcing me to do so...”

The data regarding females taking ownership of their role within the gang provided insight into why many adolescent females who are gang affiliated do not identify as a victim, they see their involvement as an active choice on their behalf rather than something they have been manipulated into being a part of. Respondents interpreted this as a way to claim power or agency, rather than victimhood, in their situation.

Community. Throughout the data collection process the issue of community or the lack of a supportive community continued to present itself. Participants described communities that were more likely to foster angry, traumatized individuals rather than promote healthy, pro-social community members.

“A lot of the Native American ladies that I worked with from Red Lake or way up north, their whole community is just so dysfunctional with chemical use, relationships and incest and it’s just not what they’re seeing at home, they’re seeing it with their aunts and uncles and parents and just everywhere in the community”.

More specifically, several participants discussed the issue of their clients returning to their home environments and communities after an out of home placement. Many of their clients were successful in making some changes and accomplishing goals while away, however, they return to their family, community and peers where little to no change had occurred.

“They go back to the same environment so as an adolescent they are really kind of stuck. You know, we take them out of it and we have them for 60 days and then we send them right back home where their home life hasn’t changed even though they maybe have.”

“And so you are sending them home, and they flourish here and they do well but then you have to send them back and it’s the families that are still so unhealthy, but what do you do? ...and the hard thing about it also when they leave here and transition to go back home, even though they know that going home is not in their best interest, there is that longing to go home.”

Furthermore, many females who have been placed out of the home in treatment centers, group homes, foster care settings or other structured settings get a glimpse of what it is like to be

a part of a positive support system. Their progress is encouraged and supported when they are in a placement but returning home often means they are now alone in their efforts to make positive progress. This lack of connection with others and feeling unsupported by their surrounding environment appears to make staying away from those that were a large part, if not, your entire world even more difficult.

“...and you see other people functioning and not living in fear and they are not paranoid, you can start to see like how you can get used to that. But then you go back to where it’s normal again, what are the odds that you are going to follow through with that on your own?”

“...they acknowledge that if they could get out easily they definitely would, but their ability to follow through on that when they don’t have someone supporting them and cheerleading them and kind of being that little bird in their ear, them following through on that is pretty slim.”

“So it’s very difficult once they actually leave the facility to maintain that distance [from gang affiliations].”

The findings would say that even when there is a trauma, change and growth are possible for the victims when they are able to develop a support system and healthy environment to flourish in. However, as the respondents reported, many young females are sent back to environments where families have experienced generations of trauma and gang involvement, thus leaving the entire family system vulnerable. Furthermore, many of the adolescent females still have the desire to feel a sense of belonging and develop attachments with their family members. Yet their own positive progress and the changes they have made while in placements,

which is helpful in distancing them from their gang, could further alienate them from their own families.

The data collected within this study provides information on a number of factors that contribute to females maintaining their gang affiliations, despite unhealthy, negative and dangerous experiences. Although the literature indicates that female involvement with gang activities is increasing, this data has provided insight into the motivations and rationale for staying in and even seeking out these relationships.

Discussion

This research project explored the various factors that influence adolescent females to maintain their gang affiliations, even when poorly treated or traumatized by other members of their gang. Specifically, the proposed research question examined adolescent female's cycle of abuse and trauma prior to and during their gang affiliation, looking at whether or not their history of past trauma played a role in their status as a gang member.

Participants in this study reported that the majority of the clients they worked with had verbalized a history of abuse, dysfunction and chaos within their family system. The data indicated that the majority of females affiliated with gangs reported abuse of some form: sexual, physical and/or neglect. There was a strong emphasis within the data that the abuse and trauma was not unique and, in fact, dated back generations within the families of female gang members. The generational abuse and trauma produced families that lacked healthy coping strategies, poor boundaries and minimal communication skills. This type of family system, according to the data, seems to motivate young females to detach from their family relationships. Many females affiliated with the gang lifestyle report a significant history of running away from home for long

periods of time. Previous research supports this finding, as Fleisher and Krienert (2004) found that the abuse within the homes of their study participants was so severe that 26% ran away from home to escape the maltreatment. Furthermore, Chamberlain and Moore's (2002) research displays similarities to the data collected, as they found that a complex trauma history of adolescent females can increase the potential for delinquency and conduct problems to appear when coupled with a stressful and chaotic daily life.

Fleisher and Krienert (2004), reported that victimization within the family system included, not only, direct abuse towards the individual, but parents that were involved with crime and a father figure who was absent in the home. The data collected is in congruence with this previous research, in that many participants discussed the generational gang membership and criminal behaviors that young children are exposed to. Additionally, the data collected stressed the importance of a father figure for adolescent females, as many gang affiliated females report little to no relationship with their biological fathers. The lack of connection with their father can result in young females seeking attention and relationships from older adult males (Snethen, 2010, p. 47). The danger of this void being filled, in this manner, is that adolescent females who have a trauma background are at risk of perpetuating the cycle as they do not have the skills to navigate relationships in a healthy, appropriate way. Gang membership becomes a part of this cycle due to the older male companionship that can be found, unhealthy or not, it is still a need they may feel compelled to meet.

These prerequisites of family dysfunction, including abuse, lack of a father and exposure to crime creates a disruption in developmental needs being met in a healthy, nurturing fashion. The data indicates that when adolescent females feel a lack of connection with their families, they seek them out elsewhere. While several respondents discussed the presence of physical and

sexual abuse, the other common denominator was neglect; adolescent females feel ignored, abandoned and devalued. The physical aspects of trauma appear to distort one's reality of healthy boundaries and interpersonal relationships but neglect leaves a lasting need for attention, acknowledgement and love. Even if the connection to another person results in continued trauma, the desire to be attached to another human being is so great that it appears to cloud the adolescent's judgment. Previous research conducted supports the idea that, whether or not an adolescent has trauma in their history, the desire to fulfill emotional needs and develop attachments is a primary motivator to joining a group. Furthermore, it may be that when adolescent females are seeking out attachments, there is no distinguishing between healthy and unhealthy attachments, the goal is to attach and feel connected regardless of detrimental impact.

This idea of belonging to someone or to a group is also a part of normal adolescent development. Respondents reported that adolescent females who become gang affiliated were looking for others to bond with, to be a part of something that is special and to feel needed within that system. Similar to this theme of bonding, past research suggests that gang membership allows for females to develop a sense of belonging with others that have endured comparable experiences. This membership becomes a coping strategy, a way for them to find answers, support and camaraderie (O'Brien, et al, 2013, p. 422). Additionally, belonging to a gang can be a part of one's survival technique. Participants in this study verbalized that many adolescent females are, in fact, cared for and taken care of initially; their desire to belong is fulfilled. They become a part of something that is bigger than just themselves; it is respected and it is feared. Previous research suggests that the desire to belong to a group or to a gang is about creating a "safe place," feeling comfort and strength in numbers. For adolescent females who have been exposed to unhealthy relationships, along with feeling neglect and abandonment by their own

families, maintaining their gang affiliation is essential in feeling connected to others. The gang becomes their new family, with rules, behaviors and activities that are similar to the old family and potentially more predictable than their biological family system. However, despite the maltreatment that may continue within the gang the adolescent female is no longer neglected, she has finally found that sense of connection, belonging, validation and importance she so desperately needed.

The literature reviewed had quite varied reports on whether females engaged in gang activities, as well as, reasons for joining or associating with gangs. Respondents interviewed in the current study expanded on this previous data set by identifying similar factors that influence females to maintain their membership with a gang. Their responses indicated that the two perspectives of research, joining and maintaining affiliation, are not mutually exclusive but rather offer further, and a more layered explanation of female gang membership in general. Take for example the issue of normalizing, previous research conducted found that many young females begin to normalize the gang lifestyle prior to membership and the recent data collected indicated the continuation of normalizing once in the gang in order to make sense of the violence against them. Furthermore, this same defense that allowed young females to become initiated in the first place had a strong influence on reinforcing their own active membership and violent behaviors.

As previous research explained the gang involvement can appear to be a perfect outlet for a young female with a history of trauma due to the nature of gang activities. The respondents suggested that females begin to explain the violence and chaos around them as “normal”, and by all accounts it has become routine for many of them. Violence, abuse and chaos have surrounded them from a very early age, the normalcy of it is not a distortion; it is in fact the

reality. In some cases, respondents indicated that female do not even view the maltreatment towards them as abuse by their fellow gang members. Respondents reported that they begin to claim ownership over their role within the gang and view it as their choice to engage in prostitution, drug running and other anti-social behaviors. Additionally, the respondents believed that the cycle of victimization is able to continue when these young females begin to believe there is no other option than a life filled with trauma. Whether they believe this to be true or not, this becomes the distortion that allows them to maintain their gang affiliations. Respondent's belief that the coping mechanism of reframing their maltreatment within the gang as a choice they are making, supports their distortions and further encourages the sustainability of their membership

Several respondents touched on the issue that being a victim of trauma and abuse distorts an adolescent's "filter" and impacts their tolerance for victimization. Previous research would also add that this "distorted filter" increases their tolerance for violence and abuse towards others (Brown, 2007, p. 407). If everyone around the adolescent female is engaging in violent and destructive behaviors, often directed at her, eventually she is going to want to express her feelings and regain control. What better way for her to solve conflict, stand up for herself, fit in with her peers and ignore her victimization than act out violently towards others, thus perpetuating the cycle of violence but more importantly, deepening her bonds with fellow gang members.

Several respondents discussed the use of drugs and alcohol as a significant factor influencing adolescent female gang affiliation. More specifically, respondents discussed the connection between substance use and prostitution, which many females within the gang are asked to or required to engage in. Past and present research both found that females affiliated

with gang are exposed to a significant amount of drug use and learn very quickly that substance use is effective in self-medicating their mental health and escaping their trauma. However, while the literature reviewed mainly focused on the general exposure to chemical use; the data collected indicated a deeper connection between gang affiliation and substance use that keeps them associated with their gang and often leads to addiction. This connection and easy access to drugs also appears to be influential in females maintaining their affiliation. The use of substances starts off for many as a way of having fun and lowering inhibitions, however, it turns into a lifeline that many females need to use to survive and spirals out of control quickly. It may be that continued drug abuse acts as reinforcement for the gang while simultaneously allowing an individual to escape her reality and shame.

Furthermore, the desire to avoid feelings of shame, guilt and victimization can develop into a need to regain control through any means necessary, even if this means choosing to partake in anti-social behaviors rather than being forced to. Oftentimes adolescent females begin to convince themselves that they have certain duties they want to engage in for the benefit of the gang. Wang (2000), reported that many females fall into roles that are considered appropriate for females. Females often take on the role of drug running and prostitution, considered by some to be less violent. This is a lucrative deal for gangs, as it brings in money with little to no risk to the male members (p.626). Research conducted by O'Brien (2013) indicated that, along with the involvement in prostitution and drug dealing, the study reported that there was an increase in the level of violence female gang members engaged in on behalf of their gang affiliations (p.418). However, respondents in this study contradicted the prior data by reporting a decrease in the level of violence females engage in due to an increase demand for them to be active in prostitution. Furthermore, adolescent females tend to be cared for and provided for at a higher

level when they are bringing in money for their pimp and fellow gang members, as opposed to females who attempt to prove their loyalty through gang banging and acts of violence. As previously mentioned, it would appear that the sense of ownership some adolescent females have over their role or the “duty” within the gang becomes influential in maintaining their membership. The belief in “role responsibility” can lead to blaming themselves for the continued trauma and furthering their spiral into shame. Respondents indicated that for some adolescent females their involvement with their gang offered them a sense of empowerment. Similarly, Molidor (1996) found that the external power and respect females found with gang membership made up for the feeling of internal powerlessness (p. 254).

Lastly, in congruence with past research the data collected supports the idea that adolescents, male or female, need to feel welcomed and engaged with their community (Sharkey, 2010, p. 47). For many adolescents school is a large part of their community. Just as the National Gang Center (2004) found that students experiencing a low sense of school attachment, low achievement scores and negative labeling by teachers will act out or become involved with delinquent peer groups, respondents in this study indicated the same information. When adolescent females return to their environments, including school, where little has changed, the transition can be difficult. Teachers, neighbors, police, and others may all continue to have a negative perception of that female and continue to place a negative label on her, resulting in feelings of isolation and exclusion. This brings up the issue of how to continue to support the growth and change of a young female when she has completed treatment, therapy or is released from an out of home placement. This lack of community resources and support was identified as a major influence in the reinforcement of gang affiliation among adolescent females.

Specifically, it is important to stress the issue that even when females were removed from their gang affiliates and motivated to make healthy changes in their life, the lack of a supportive environment influenced them to return to the gang lifestyle. The lack of resources and support brings attention back to the theme of belonging and connection; if adolescents do not feel that their need to connect and belong is meaningfully being met over time on a continual basis, the research demonstrates they will likely seek out connections wherever they can find them. This means that even after they have gained insight into the destructive nature of gang affiliations, they will likely continue those relationships and maintain their membership because the need to fit in and feel emotionally attached is so great it can override an adolescent's better, cognitive judgment.

Implications for Social Work Practice

As social workers it is imperative to continue to develop ideas and strategies to provide interventions or take preventative measures when working with young females who are at risk of becoming gang affiliated. In order to develop appropriate resources and supports, knowledge and understanding of the factors contributing to females joining gangs is necessary. Clearly, both the previous research reviewed and the data collected indicated trauma as a major influence on female gang affiliation. Social workers need to be aware of the lasting imprint trauma can have on adolescent's attachments or lack thereof. This primary need to develop attachments can be addressed early on and possibly deter many females from engaging in high risk behaviors and ultimately avoid associating with gangs. While many social workers are entry points for youth into the social service system or juvenile justice system, they are not always the first to notice adolescents struggling. However, social workers could provide education and insight for teachers, physicians, day care providers, coaches, police officers and any other professionals

coming into contact with children and adolescents who are starting to display high risk behaviors or appear to lack stable attachments.

Furthermore, as social workers we should adhere to seeing situations within the systems perspective and in this case, family systems. In reality the adolescent female on our caseload is not the only piece of the puzzle. We should extend beyond the presenting client in order to examine their family system, community and culture so that the appropriate supports can be put into place. This would include developing a plan to address family therapy, appropriate school setting, possible long term group home or independent living placements, recreational therapist or community specialist, cultural activities and employment opportunities just to name a few. The development of support groups that target adolescent females is also important, as many of the young women leaving a facility or placement may want to bond with other females who have similar experiences.

Implications for Policy

The data collected shed insight on the need for policies to be altered within our juvenile justice system. Policies need to be in place so that adolescent females are not just being locked up and then released. Whether it is substance abuse treatment, crisis shelter, residential treatment, group home placement, detention center or correctional facility, policies should require access to trauma therapy while in the placement and continued referrals for aftercare.

The engagement of family, community members or other professionals in the adolescent's life should also be factors in the care and treatment of adolescent females. Policy should be developed so that we are looking at the entire system our clients live in, which includes school, family, neighborhoods, etc. According to the respondents in this study,

community building and efforts to engage youth with their culture are preventative steps that could be taken to help deter adolescent females from associating with gangs. It is clear that the issue of gang affiliation is much bigger than a single event, policies need to be developed in order to create supports and resources for the entire system our young females interact with. The data collected also sheds light on the need to address policies that may be making it difficult for certain groups (i.e. low income families, persons of color) to access resources or compete in today's economy.

Furthermore, the need to address maltreatment in the form of neglect children appears to be important. Our attention and focus is often placed on the physical act of abuse and maltreatment of our vulnerable populations. The issue of neglect and why families neglect their children appears to be significantly under researched and addressed. It is apparent that neglect of a child can have serious consequences and future research highlighting this form of trauma would be helpful in developing our policies and procedures around the abuse of children.

Implications for Research

It is imperative that continued research and examination be done on the prevalence of female gang affiliation in general. The information and data is significantly lacking on this issue. Continued research needs to expand on the environmental influences, looking at how geographical locations differ in their experience of female gang members. Research should also continue to examine substance abuse among these youth, as many are using drugs and alcohol to self-medicate their symptoms, which could and is leading to addiction. It would be beneficial for future research to examine the concept of adolescents using gang membership and the use of drugs as a way to escape their perceived reality. Further, I believe that it is extremely important that research and studies continue to examine the relationship between gang affiliation and PTSD

diagnosis, as at this point the evidence is scarce and inadequate due to past belief that their behaviors were because of anti-social traits, rather than reenacting their trauma.

Furthermore, continued research needs to address the issue of generational gang membership within family systems. Data collected on this issue could shed light on the continued cycle of gang violence and trauma some families endure and engage in generation after generation, this would also allow insight into prevention strategies and effective intervention approaches.

Lastly, studies conducted should continue to gather data from the professionals working with adolescent female gang members but it will be essential to gather data directly from the young women themselves.

Strengths and Limitations

Although researchers are finding that females are actively engaged in gang activity, it is still a relatively new phenomenon in the literature and the available research on this topic was very limited. Much of the available research has a more general focus on adolescent female delinquency rather than specifically looking at adolescent females engaged in gang activities and crime; this study will contribute to the existing limited body of research. Since gender specific programming is being called upon to meet the needs of adolescent females, there is a need for more qualitative research to deepen the understanding of their experience in order to develop effective interventions. An additional benefit of this study is that it will help raise social workers' awareness of the attachment issues that influence affiliation with a group that may in fact be harmful and the needs met within the gang that motivate adolescent females to maintain their loyalty even while enduring trauma.

Due to the qualitative nature of this research and time constraints faced by this researcher, a smaller sample size was used, thereby limiting the ability to generalize the results. The population that was interviewed may also limit the ability to generalize the results. This study only investigated the experience and observations of the professional working with adolescent females that are gang affiliated; this leaves out non-professionals, such as family, that may have differing experiences than those in a professional role. This study does not address the experiences of gang members themselves; the data collected did not include past or present female gang members that could have provided firsthand accounts of their experiences. A further limitation is the subjective nature of qualitative research. This researcher has her own personal biases regarding this topic which could have impacted the data collection and interpretation process.

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Appendix A

Factors that Contribute to Maintaining Gang Affiliation among Adolescent Females Exposed to Trauma

Research Study

** Are you currently working with adolescent females that are gang affiliated and have a history of trauma?*

**Are you interested in sharing your experiences working with females that are gang affiliated and have a history of trauma by participating in this study?*

DETAILS: Bridget Kingsley, graduate student in the Master of Social Work Program at St. Catherine University and University of St. Thomas will be conducting the research study.

PURPOSE: In an attempt to further the body of research on gang affiliation among adolescent females, this study will focus specifically on the victimization of adolescent females who are gang affiliated. As the research has proven, gang affiliation among adolescent females is becoming an increasingly significant problem. Gender specific programming is becoming essential in providing care for these individuals. However, as strategies are developed for prevention and intervention techniques, it is becoming important to examine why females remain gang affiliated as research would indicate that the promise of stability, family, protection, money, freedom from abuse and respect are not always fulfilled. The purpose of this research is to examine the factors that contribute to adolescent females, who have been exposed to trauma, to maintain their gang affiliation.

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA:

- Professionals who are currently working with females who are or have been gang affiliated.
- Some knowledge or expertise on gang affiliation.
- Awareness and insight on trauma experienced through gang initiation and affiliation.

If you answered YES to these questions you may be eligible to participate in a companion animal loss research study.

INTERESTED? Participation in this research is **completely voluntary**. If you are interested in participating in this research study or would like more information, please contact Bridget Kingsley at xxx-xxx-xxxx for further details.

Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. How large is your female client population? What percentage of this female population that you work with is gang affiliated?
2. Could you tell me how you know if the individual you are working with is in fact affiliated with a gang?
3. In your opinion, why do you think adolescent females become gang affiliated?
4. What type of traumatic experiences do they report exposure to or firsthand experience with prior to working with you?
5. How do the females that are gang affiliated describe their home environment?
 - a. How do they describe the communities they come from?
6. Can you tell me more about the attachment styles/relationships you see these females engaging in?
 - a. Specifically, what type of family attachments appear primary for these females that are gang affiliated?
7. What type of trauma is reported during the initiation process?
8. What type of trauma is experienced as an active gang member? (post-initiation)
9. In your experience of working with adolescent females who are gang affiliated, what factors keep them in gangs, despite trauma and poor treatment?
10. a. In your opinion, to what extent does the trauma experienced by female gang members prior to gang initiation influence them to maintain their gang affiliation?
 - b. In your opinion, how does the trauma experienced by female gang members while in the gang, influence them to maintain their gang affiliation?

11. What are the reasons, if any; these females choose to end their affiliation?

Appendix C

Factors that Contribute to Maintaining Gang Affiliation among Adolescent Females Exposed to Trauma

Research Information and Consent Form

I am conducting a study regarding the motivating factors that influence adolescent females, who have likely previously been exposed to trauma, to maintain their gang affiliation even though it is likely that they will endure continued trauma. I invite you to participate in this research. You were selected as a possible participant because you have substantial experience working with adolescents who are gang affiliated. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Bridget Kingsley, MA, LADC, a graduate student at the School of Social Work, St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas and supervised by Dr. Jessica Toft.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to examine the factors that contribute to adolescent females maintaining their gang affiliation. Professionals who work closely with these youth have special insight into their motivations and reasoning for staying in gangs. This study will specifically be examining the possible influence that being exposed to trauma, prior to gang affiliation, has on adolescent females deciding to remain gang affiliated even though they may continue to be victimized.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things: Participate in a semi-structured interview that will be about 50 minutes long and located offsite. This interview session will be recorded and transcribed for the purposes of coding and obtaining data. A research paper will be written based on the data and the findings will be presented to the public. Some quotes will be in the paper, but no identifying information will be present in the study.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

There are no known risks. However, there is always a potential risk of invasion of privacy. Identifying risks with professionals working with this specific population is difficult.

Participants will be given a \$10 gift card for Starbucks for participation in this study.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept confidential. In any sort of report I publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you in any way. The types of records I will create include audio recordings and transcripts and all records will be stored on a password protected locked computer. Additionally, notes taken during the interview and consent forms will be kept in this researcher's home in a locked cabinet. A transcriptionist and I will have access to these records. The transcriber will sign a confidentiality agreement before transcribing the interviews. I will not tell your employer that you have participated in the research and the interviews will occur away from work so no one can identify that you participated. All recordings and transcripts will be destroyed May 15, 2014.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of St. Thomas. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time up to and until May 15, 2014. Should you decide to withdraw data collected about you will be destroyed. You are also free to skip any questions I may ask.

Contacts and Questions

My name is Bridget Kingsley. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at 507-993-5095. You may also contact my instructor Dr. Jessica Toft at 651-962-5803. You may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-5341 with any questions or concerns.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to be audiotaped. I consent to participate in the study. I am at least 18 years of age.

Signature of Study Participant

Date

Print Name of Study Participant

Date

Signature of Researcher

Date